

PEOPLE STORYING



A Play in Two Acts

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Synopsis

The audience dives into the lives of seven pairs of disparate individuals, each pair at their own table in a shared restaurant. The order in which the pairs appear follows an unstated progression through stages of adulthood: a soon-to-graduate from university young woman with difficult choices and too little knowledge/experience to draw from, former university classmates in their late twenties catching up with each other and wondering what might have been, a marriage beset by a midlife crisis, an "empty-nested" mother examining her life now, a woman sorting through post menopausal freedoms, a later-in-life but still-too-soon impending death from cancer, and retired strangers sharing in the recent losses of their parents. As the focus transitions from one pair to the next, each pair observes the subsequent pair at a nearby table and conjectures about what their story might be, prior to the ensuing dialogue gradually revealing it.

Cast of Characters

(played by six actors, as shown in table below)

<u>Teresa Sardone:</u>	Widow in her early fifties.
<u>Stephanie:</u>	Single woman, collegiate, in her early twenties; Sardone's niece.
<u>Everett:</u>	Man of African descent in his late twenties.
<u>Eileen:</u>	Woman of Asian descent in her late twenties; former classmate of Everett's at university.
<u>Barbara:</u>	Woman in her late thirties.
<u>Dan:</u>	Man in his early forties; Barbara's husband.
<u>Gary:</u>	Middle-aged man; Barbara's fling.
<u>Judy:</u>	Married woman in her mid forties.
<u>Mary:</u>	Single woman in her mid forties; friend of Judy.
<u>Lyle:</u>	Man of African descent in his early thirties; potential gigolo for Sardone.
<u>Mark:</u>	Male professor in his early fifties.
<u>Bill:</u>	Christian man in his early sixties; brother of Mark.
<u>Lou:</u>	Man of African descent, in his late sixties.
<u>Amy:</u>	Woman of Asian descent, in her mid sixties.
<u>Maitre d' (Paul):</u>	Man in his early forties.
<u>Server one (Steve):</u>	Man in his mid twenties.
<u>Server two (Dana):</u>	Woman about twenty years old.

Act - segment	Character	Actor 1	Actor 2	Actor 3	Actor 4	Actor 5	Actor 6
I-1	Sardone				X		
I-1	Stephanie					X	
I-1	Maitre d'	(X)					
I-1	Server 1		(X)				
I-2	Everett			X			
I-2	Eileen						X
I-2	Maitre d'	(X)					
I-2	Server 1		(X)				
I-3	Barbara				X		
I-3	Dan	X					
I-3	Gary		(X)				
I-4	Judy					X	
I-4	Mary						X
I-4	Server 1		(X)				
I-4	Sardone				(X)		
I-4	Lyle			(X)			
II-1	Sardone				X		
II-1	Lyle			X			
II-1	Maitre d'	(X)					
II-1	Server 2					(X)	
II-2	Mark		X				
II-2	Bill	X					
II-2	Server 2					(X)	
II-3	Lou			X			
II-3	Amy						X
II-3	Server 2					(X)	

X denotes major role of the character in that segment.
(X) denotes minor role, appearing such that time is allowed for costume changes, as needed.

Scene

The two acts take place in a restaurant in real-time-progression: the first act during one late afternoon and the second act, following intermission, during the evening of that same day.

There are no separate scenes, per se, within the acts.

The location is an unnamed city in the United States.

Time

The present.

ACT I

SETTING:

The stage is split in half with the ability to illuminate the two halves separately. Both halves of the stage are illuminated for now. There is an empty table on left stage and a podium on right stage. All tables throughout the play have three chairs: one with its back toward the audience (which is only used once -- in segment 3 of Act I) and the other two slightly facing each other but mostly facing the audience. The podium appears only at the beginning of each act and at the end of Act I.

AT RISE:

The MAITRE D' stands at the podium engrossed in an open reservations book on the podium. SARDONE and STEPHANIE approach the MAITRE D' from off stage.

MAITRE D'

(barely looking up)

Welcome to "The Does." Party of two?

SARDONE

(sarcastically)

Yes, Paul, two; just like in my reservation. What a coincidence.

MAITRE D'

Ah Ms. Sardone, I didn't recognize you at first.

SARDONE

That's only because you were too shy to leave the light on last night.

MAITRE D'

(scouring the reservation book while barely suppressing a chuckle)

Well par-DOANE me, Ms. Sar-DOANE. I'm sorry to inform you, we decided to cancel your reservation because you're so naughty.

(smiling broadly and genuinely at both of them)

Right this way.

(MAITRE D' leads SARDONE and STEPHANIE to the table, assists them in getting seated, with SARDONE on the left, and hands them menus while conversing with them)

MAITRE D'

Your table is ready for you, Ms. Sardone, but the world may never be.

(right stage gradually goes dark and the rest of this segment is confined to the currently occupied left stage until transitioning to the next segment)

SARDONE

(while overtly inspecting PAUL up and down and back again)

Paul, I must compliment you. You are making such excellent progress hiding your effeminate mannerisms. Do keep up the good work with your continuing-education classes on how to get back in the closet.

MAITRE D'

(smiling, unfazed, to STEPHANIE)

Is this your first visit to "The Does?"

STEPHANIE

Yes, although Aunt Teresa and I have been hoping to meet here for years, so I'm excited about finally getting the chance.

MAITRE D'

Well that's wonderful. Here at "The Does" we always appreciate when lovely young ladies are excited to be here. Is this a special occasion or do you always dress so nicely?

(SARDONE displays a demeanor which expresses annoyance and a bit of jealousy at the attention STEPHANIE is receiving, but the MAITRE D' intentionally ignores it)

STEPHANIE

(slightly embarrassed)

Thank you. I guess you could say this is a special occasion, wouldn't you Aunt Teresa?

SARDONE

Stephanie will be graduating from college next week, where she studied subjects like how to tell when a flirtatious Maitre d' might need to attend to his other patrons who are not nicely dressed, lovely young ladies.

MAITRE D'

You are so right. So, Ms. Sardone, how have you been?

(SARDONE and MAITRE D' engage in a
good-natured staring contest briefly)

SARDONE

You won that round.

MAITRE D'

(smiling again)

Your server will be with you shortly. It is a pleasure to meet
you, Ms. Stephanie. I hope you will not wait as long to return
in the future.

(MAITRE D' leaves)

STEPHANIE

Aunt Teresa, I can't believe you made that remark about
effeminate mannerisms. He isn't the least bit effeminate.

SARDONE

No need for concern, my dear. There is no lapse in that man's
confidence regarding his own masculinity. Besides, whenever I'm
here and Paul leads me to my table, I try to come up with some
quip to give myself an alibi for enjoying the view. He's got a
truly lovely ass.

STEPHANIE

You were just kidding about last night, right? You haven't, you
know ... have you?

SARDONE

Paul is never without younger and prettier companionship than
me.

(she pauses)

That was your cue.

STEPHANIE

(momentarily startled)

Oh, um, less experienced maybe, but surely not prettier.

SARDONE

I have to mark you down for tardiness, but you got extra credit
for that "less experienced" phrase. I liked that.
Anyway, Paul treats my attention as strictly playful
entertainment and I know better than to push it. I have my
pride. But he is fun to think about, if you know what I mean.
So tell me, my favorite niece, where is life taking you next?
What are your plans?

STEPHANIE

Well, for starters, I'm engaged.
(she displays her ring finger)

SARDONE

How awful of me not to have noticed. You know, normally, I can spot the faintest of tan lines on a man's bare ring finger from across a bar.
Have you set a date?

STEPHANIE

We've been discussing that. His name is Chris. He graduates with me next week. We've been dating for three years. We hope ...

SARDONE

Three years? Dating for three years? With none of my husbands was I even married that long. Well I sincerely hope you're not still a virgin after dating for three years, otherwise you're going to have to throw that one back.

(SERVER 1 approaches the table
inattentively)

SERVER 1

Good evening, ladies. My name is Steve. I'll be serving you tonight. May I ...

SARDONE

(interrupting)

Steve.

SERVER 1

(sheepishly)

Oh, Ms. Sardone. Um, good to see you again.

SARDONE

Look up occasionally, dear. There's a whole world just waiting to be discovered.

Now, I'm anxious to hear all about how you want to serve us tonight. Or do I need to use my whip to loosen your tongue?

SERVER 1

(embarrassed)

Um, um, would you, um, ladies like something to drink?

SARDONE

We um-ladies would love something to drink. I'll have a margarita, no salt.

STEPHANIE

I'll have a diet coke, please.

SARDONE

(too loudly)

You're pregnant?!

STEPHANIE

(embarrassed)

No. I just want a diet coke.

SARDONE

Steve, this is my favorite niece, Stephanie. She will be graduating from college next week and we are getting together for one of our not-frequent-enough chances to catch up.

SERVER 1

Cool. I'm saving up to go to college.

STEPHANIE

That's great. What do you plan to major in?

SERVER 1

Um, I'm not sure yet.

STEPHANIE

What schools are you considering applying to?

SERVER 1

Um, I'm, like, not that far along yet.
Well, I better get your order in.

(SERVER 1 leaves)

SARDONE

I'm afraid Steve wants more out of life than this, but is too lazy or afraid of rejection to actively pursue anything else. He is "doing a job," while he waits for something better to come along, though he has no clue as to what that might be, let alone how to achieve it.

STEPHANIE

You sound like Rod Serling.

(imitating Serling)

He stumbles along, barely meeting the requirements of life, while never exploring the electives available along the way. But in just a moment, this young man will find himself registered for the curriculum of ... "The Twilight Zone."

SARDONE

How do you know about "The Twilight Zone?"

STEPHANIE

I've been taking the most fantastic history course this last term -- a survey of the people who shaped our culture, and the professor devoted part of one lecture to Rod Serling.

SARDONE

I remember Rod Serling's deep, sexy voice sending shivers in more places than up my spine. Where were we? You've been dating the same guy for three years? Steph, patience may be a virtue, but only when all your other options are worse.

STEPHANIE

We both feel we need to get ourselves established in our careers and ...

SARDONE

(interrupting)

What are your career plans? You're going to have your own career, aren't you, and not just be Mrs. Someone-or-other? Don't make my mistake.

STEPHANIE

First of all, how bad of a mistake was it for you, considering how many of your husbands were well-to-do? But Chris is not wealthy and I would want my own career even if he were. I have an interview ...

SARDONE

(interrupting and sneering)

Does your father approve of you having your own career?

STEPHANIE

You're joking, right? Dad still believes "girls" should live at home: dutiful and barefoot.

SARDONE

That used to be easier for women to accept, before God created shoe stores.

STEPHANIE

And on Labor Day, God created the three-day, blow-out shoe sale.

SARDONE

And it was good.

STEPHANIE

It was real good. No, I haven't told Dad yet. And he doesn't know about Chris yet, either. So please don't tell him.

SARDONE

My dear Stephanie, the last thing I shared with your wonderful father was one of my dolls, and that was only because your grandmother insisted I should be nice to my younger brother. He broke it, of course; though I'm superlatively confident he would

SARDONE (Cont.)

adamantly claim he never played with dolls as a child. Oh, and that he also never peeked in the bathroom when I was showering.

STEPHANIE

My father is not a pervert.

SARDONE

I agree. But he's got his head up his butt so far he can't accept that we're all just people. One of my husbands, I can't remember which one, reminded me of your father. The morning of election days, he would go through the ballot and instruct me on how I was to vote.

STEPHANIE

How could you let him do that?

SARDONE

It was actually fun. He would tell me some of the most absurd political views and conspiracies. Lord I don't know where he came up with such nonsense.

STEPHANIE

But you voted the way he told you to?

SARDONE

Who said that? When it comes to learning the value of a secret ballot, high school civics class can't hold a candle to being married to an arrogantly opinionated idiot.

(MAITRE D' approaches)

MAITRE D'

Ladies, I've had some complaints from everyone else here that the two of you are having too much fun. It's like chewing gum in class -- you have to bring enough to share with the whole class.

SARDONE

(imitating a Buddhist monk)

Oh, buff but dishonorable weed-wacker,

(she gazes toward his midsection)

not all lessons learned from elementary school apply universally to the human condition.

STEPHANIE

I have a question. "The Does" is an unusual name. Who came up with that name and why?

(SARDONE looks away from both of them and winces in anticipation of something she wishes she could avoid, but accepts she will just have to be patient)

MAITRE D'

That's not the real name. The original name is much more clever but no one used it. Everyone always shortened it. So we gave in and shortened the name on the front of the building, too.

STEPHANIE

What was the original name?

MAITRE D'

Here is the business card with the full name.

STEPHANIE

(reading out loud from the card,
tentatively, fighting to keep a
straight face)

Here's Wheres Da Does Goes.

MAITRE D'

(proudly and smoothly)

Here's Wheres Do Does Goes. It poetic. But shortening names is something people naturally tend to do, I guess.

SARDONE

(taking her knuckle out of her teeth
and rejoining the conversation)

Paul, I didn't realize you were such an avid student of people. Perhaps someday you can pass the test and be one of us.

STEPHANIE

(somewhat mortified)

Aunt Teresa!

MAITRE D'

Don't worry, I know she's just saying that because she's hoping I'd ask her for some private tutoring.

(SARDONE lets a smile slip out
acknowledging his riposte and Paul
leaves triumphantly)

STEPHANIE

Not that I'm displeased that you passed on that opportunity to dice him into little pieces over

(mockingly)

"Here's Wheres Da Does Goes," but why didn't you?

SARDONE

Paul came up with that name and it disappointed him terribly when it wasn't embraced enthusiastically by anyone else. No matter how self-assured a person seems, no matter how thick skinned, there are always chinks in the armor. Injure someone there and you will never be able to take it back. I field tested that theory among too many husbands and lovers.

SARDONE (Cont.)

But where were we? Your fiancé. What was his name again?

STEPHANIE

Chris. He's really smart and ambitious. And
(with astonishment)
he helps with the chores.

SARDONE

You're living together. Wonderful. One should always try on the merchandise.

STEPHANIE

No, but we sometimes do laundry together and he washes the dishes when I have him over for dinner. You know, things like that.

SARDONE

Wait, you said you've been dating for three years and you're engaged. Why aren't you living together?

STEPHANIE

He suggested it -- more than once. I'm just, I don't know. I want to get my career started. And ... there's ... Aunt Teresa, I need your advice on something that's really concerning me.

SARDONE

Dear, you know how much I enjoy giving advice. Ask away.

STEPHANIE

During this last term, I've been taking a great history class, like I said. It was the best class I ever had.

(she hesitates, mustering courage)

And the professor is really ... passionate ... about teaching, about history.

(she pauses again)

SARDONE

We all have paths we didn't take, and then spend the rest of our lives wondering, "What if." You're thinking about going back for a second degree in history and a change in career direction.

STEPHANIE

(stunned and disrupted)

No. No, nothing like that. No, I'm not rethinking any of that.

(SERVER 1 returns with their drinks
and begins to set them methodically
on their table, beginning with STEPHANIE's)

SARDONE

This will be my first alcoholic beverage in over a week.

SERVER 1

(concerned, withholding her margarita)

You're not about to fall off the train, are you?

SARDONE

(confused momentarily)

You mean fall off the wagon? No, Steve.

(addressing both STEPHANIE and SERVER 1)

Stupid me tripped on a curb, hitting my head, and the doctor told me to stay away from alcohol for at least a week.

STEPHANIE

It was bad enough that you went to the doctor?

SARDONE

Not by choice. Some well-meaning observer placed a totally unnecessary 911 call, and before I could flee the scene of my crime of inelegance, an ambulance pulled up and I was surrounded by overly-energetic EMTs acting as if I were the team quarterback and they were high school cheerleaders.

One of them kept asking me stupid questions, "Who's the president? What day is it? How old are you?" I was embarrassed, I had a headache, and I just wanted to get out of there. So I disgustedly told her it makes no difference who the president is because we get the royal shaft anyway, the day is one I would love to forget, and I told her my birthday and said, "you do the math, 'cause I don't anymore." Next thing you know they abducted me and some way-too-young doctor-like critter at the emergency room was pretending to know what he was looking for while blinding me with a flashlight.

Now, Steve, may I have my drink, please.

SERVER 1

(setting her drink in front of her)

Oh, sure, Ms. Sardone. It's just that I've been told how important it is to keep up with the program at A-A-A.

SARDONE

I didn't fall off the car, either, Steve.

Besides, I wouldn't go to A-A under any circumstances. I can't stand religious zealots. They try to accumulate souls as if converts were frequent flier miles. If they hope to cash in those converted souls for an upgraded flight to Heaven, they're going to be very disappointed.

SERVER 1

(obliviously)

Will there be anything else?

SARDONE

You mean right this instant, a little later, or for the rest of eternity?

(she smiles reassuringly in response
to SERVER 1's befuddled face)

We're fine for now, but please check back later.

(SERVER 1 leaves)

SARDONE

You were saying you were rethinking your career path?

STEPHANIE

No, I'm good with that.

SARDONE

That's right. So what is the problem?

STEPHANIE

It's just that ... well, it feels like things are suddenly happening ... I don't know, maybe too fast? Ya know? Like there's a light at the end of the tunnel, but it's Doppler blue-shifted.

SARDONE

(chuckling, then seriously)

I haven't a clue what that means.

STEPHANIE

It's a little joke. The Doppler effect is like when a train is blowing its horn and it sounds higher pitched as it approaches than as it goes away from you. In astronomy, they say the light from a star is Doppler blue-shifted when the star is moving toward you. So the joke about the light at the end of the tunnel being blue-shifted implies the light at the end of the tunnel is actually on the front of a train locomotive and it's about to run you over.

SARDONE

I'm not even going to pretend I followed that. But if I ever find myself tied up on a train track like some silent movie heroine, I'll be sure to think about that joke when Dudley Do-Right of the Royal Canadian Mounties rescues me.

STEPHANIE

(embarrassed that her joke went
over so poorly)

It's just that ... well, how do you know when, ya know, when he's the one?

SARDONE

Hah! One of the questions most asked by youth. You're too young to know that. In fact, you may always be too young to know that. Despite -- or maybe because of -- my multiply demonstrated lack of credentials for answering that question, I can assure you, you can't know.

STEPHANIE

But shouldn't -- when it's right -- shouldn't you at least lose interest in other men?

SARDONE

Heaven forbid! After eating the same meal day after day, year after year, how do you expect to maintain an appetite?

SARDONE

(incredulously)

Not by extra-marital affairs!

SARDONE

Of course not, ...

(wrestling with her conscience)

mostly.

STEPHANIE

Aunt Teresa, you must have learned so much about what to look for and what to avoid.

SARDONE

You've been reading those magazines at the check-out counter, haven't you? "Ten ways to know if he will stay with you forever." "Five ways to know if he had liposuction."

STEPHANIE

But shouldn't there be some sort of a checklist?

SARDONE

There are no magic formulas. People change over time and you can't be sure whether you'll grow together or apart.

STEPHANIE

Shouldn't it at least start out without ... distractions?

(MAITRE D' returns)

MAITRE D'

Just checking on you ladies, making sure everything is alright.

SARDONE

I neglected to ask how you are Paul.

MAITRE D'

(rotating his shoulders)

Well thank you for asking. I don't know why, but I've been feeling kind of stiff today.

SARDONE

Remember the warning on the label, if that condition persists for more than four hours, you need to see a doctor. And this time, Paul, when you do go to see the doctor, don't loudly announce the reason for your visit as soon as you open the door to the doctor's crowded waiting room.

MAITRE D'

I will make an extra effort to remember that.

(he leaves smiling)

SARDONE

Where were we?

(during the latest interaction between SARDONE and the MAITRE D', STEPHANIE had been disappointed one too many times while trying to unburden herself, and had become distracted by the table gradually becoming illuminated on right stage where EVERETT and EILEEN are seated, EILEEN to the right, in animated but unheard-as-yet conversation, and SERVER 1 is standing at their table-side intently listening; the podium is gone)

SARDONE

What are you staring at?

STEPHANIE

I guess you could call it a hobby of mine. I spot interesting looking people and imagine the story behind them. I call it "people storying."

SARDONE

You mean people watching.

STEPHANIE

No, that's just observing. For people storying, you have to imagine what the relationship is from what their body language and actions imply.

(she starts musing out loud a story behind what she and the audience sees playing out at the other table)

It's a couple living together "in sin," far away from their families to avoid the disapproval, and she has just returned from an extended business trip.

SARDONE

They are two closet racists, set up on a blind date as a practical joke by a mutual friend with a perverse sense of humor, and each of them are uncontrollably overcompensating for their shock at seeing each other for the first time here at Does, each swearing to themselves they'll get even with that friend later.

(SARDONE is visibly proud at having "outdone" STEPHANIE at her own game and starts to stand up)

So now we go over there and find out what the real story is, right?

STEPHANIE

(struggling to maintain appropriate decorum while almost lunging to stop SARDONE, and barely containing a screech)

No, we do not.

(SARDONE settles back down and smiles so as to reveal she was just pulling Stephanie's leg.)

SARDONE

(staring at the other table, wistfully)
No, I wouldn't have interrupted that wonderful conversation.

(STEPHANIE is again looking over her shoulder toward stage right and her face betrays she was hurt by the contrast to how often SARDONE interrupted her, but SARDONE is unable to see STEPHANIE's expression)

SARDONE

Will you be seeing your fiancé tonight?

STEPHANIE

Not tonight.

(purposefully redirecting the conversation)
What are you doing this evening?

SARDONE

(body language displaying a "blush")
A girl has to maintain some mystery about herself.

STEPHANIE

Well, I do need to be getting home. I need to feed my dog. He's always so thrilled to see me, wagging his tail so hard.

SARDONE

I wish I could have said either of those things about even just one of my husbands.

(they laugh together, with their laughter fading out, along with the lighting of their half of the stage, as the conversation from the other table becomes audible)

EILEEN

It was kind of like dark energy.

EVERETT

I've heard of dark energy. What is that?

EILEEN

We've all experienced dark energy, we just never called it that in the past. Haven't you ever put a towel back on its rack, turned around after you were sure it was sitting on the rack, and then the towel falls to the floor? That's dark energy in action.

Or you put a glass in the sink, it wobbles for a moment and then settles down, you walk out of the room and hear the sound of the glass breaking in the sink? That's dark energy in action.

A few days ago I tossed an open bag onto a table and watched as it skidded across the surface and came to rest right at the far edge of the table. Previously, before I learned about dark energy, I would have gone about my business, confident in my expectation that the bag was not going anywhere. Now that I know about dark energy, though, I hurried over to that edge of the table and arrived just in time to be in position when dark energy pushed that bag over the edge. I'm counting on the mayor's office sending me my hero's commendation any day now.

(EVERETT had already been catching on that she was playing with the two men, but kept from saying anything, seeing that SERVER 1 was still engrossed in her story)

SERVER 1

(finally realizing her story was a joke)

Oh, man, I completely fell for that. I am too gullible.

(MAITRE D' approaches and SERVER 1 rushes off, suddenly realizing he had spent too much time at that one table)

MAITRE D'

The other customers noticed how much fun the two of you are having and asked me to find out what you're drinking.

EVERETT

That actually happened to me last week. A neighbor was driving by and stopped to ask what I had been drinking.

EILEEN

No! Why?

EVERETT

There was this dang-blasted mole on the property, pushing up mounds of dirt on the sidewalk for over a month. Each time I had to struggle to force the dirt back under the sidewalk. Well, I finally spotted it in the act of pushing up yet another mound of dirt. I grabbed a shovel and shoveled into the mound not really expecting to catch it -- just out of frustration and anger. I was so shocked when I exposed it that I unintentionally shrieked out loud, "get her," as if the shovel was my robotic assistant who needed instruction on what to do next. The shovel flew into action. After about a minute, I stopped to catch my breath. Lizzie Borden would have been proud of me. I stood there jogging in place with my hands raised like in the scene at the top of the stairs from the first "Rocky" movie -- just as my neighbor came driving by.

MAITRE D'

(briefly doing an imitation of the scene with arms lifted)

I loved that scene. There's a bumper sticker which is so great: "Revenge is a moral imperative."

EILEEN

(enjoying the story but feigning disgust all along, only because it's what a female is supposed to display at such a story)

OK, you exacted revenge on a blind rodent; albeit
(she shudders)
an incredibly ugly one.

EVERETT

But it isn't just an ordinary rodent anymore. Now, it's a legend. It has a name and its own ballad: "Big Bad Molly."
(EILEEN groans and EVERETT imitates the Jimmy Dean ballad "Big Bad John")
Well I covered back over that shallow pit,
And put a parchment sign in front of it.
These few words were written on that scroll:
"At the bottom of this hole lies a dead, dead mole -- Diced Molly"
Diced Molly, diced Mollllllly
Pain in the ass, stinking, wretched, diced-up Molly.

EILEEN

Eeewwwwhhhh.

EVERETT

Coming from you who loved dissecting frogs in biology class?

EILEEN

Frogs aren't ugly.

MAITRE D'

You only think that because ladies are taught they have to kiss so many frogs before finding their Prince Charming.

(MAITRE D' leaves, pleased with his comment, as both patrons signal their agreement with that assessment)

EILEEN

Oooohh, that was good.

EVERETT

Good. Good.

(pointing at her wedding band)

Speaking about Prince Charmings, you got married, I see.

EILEEN

(coily and briefly displaying her ring and then pointing at his)

And I'm not the only one.

EVERETT

You first. Tell me about your Prince Charming and I'll tell you about mine.

(EILEEN looks at him quizzically)

EVERETT

No, she's a Princess Charming.

EILEEN

Do you remember that heart-to-heart talk we had when we went to dinner together right after our biology final?

EVERETT

Of course I do. That was the last time we saw each other.

EILEEN

Yeah, it was weird. I mean, we were just lab partners for one term, didn't know anything about each other, and then we had that dinner and just opened up to each other.

EVERETT

I didn't expect that either. We were both exhausted from finals week and figured we'd get something to eat and compare our answers to the test. And then we never heard from each other again. It was strange.

EILEEN

Yeah. Anyway, you listened to me talk about what I wanted from life and said I needed a Prince Charming. That's what you said.

EVERETT

I remember.

EILEEN

And I vehemently denied it. Sometimes I wonder if maybe you were right and I settled for something less. I mean, I'm happy; but I wanted lots of kids, so I needed to get started early, couldn't wait forever, and I'm "old school," remember?, and raising kids requires a lot more than charm, and I had it up to here with frogs.

(she raises her left hand to her nose to signify how "up to here" she "had it," and he tilts her hand to study her rather large engagement ring)

EVERETT

(impishly)

He may not be that charming, but he's apparently a prince of the realm.

(EILEEN takes a slow, playful swing at EVERETT, which he nonchalantly backs away from and they share a smile)

EVERETT

So lots of kids?

EILEEN

That was the plan. That plan floated like a canoe carrying a grand piano through a waterfall. We haven't been able to have any yet -- not sure what we're going to do about it.

EVERETT

I'm sorry.

EILEEN

Thanks. Tell me about you.

EVERETT

After graduation, I got a job in Seattle and have been living there ever since.

EILEEN

What are you doing here?

EVERETT

I'm on a business trip with some time to kill before my flight back home.

EILEEN

Oh my god, how freaky that I would run in to you then. I live a couple of blocks away and was walking home from the bus stop when I saw you get out of your car.

EVERETT

I'm glad you missed what happened just before that. When I was looking for a parking spot in the lot here, some driver pulled out of a handicapped spot without looking. I slammed on the brakes and the horn. He kept on backing up, put his car in drive, looked at me like he did nothing wrong, and went on his way.

EILEEN

At least now you know what his handicap is.

(wistfully)

Do you get to travel a lot?

EVERETT

Too much. Judging from the way you asked that, I suspect this is a classic case of the grass is always greener. Flying stinks. On the bright side, though, flying brings you in contact with the greatest liars on the face of the Earth.

I was waiting in Seattle airport to catch my flight to come here and it was scheduled to leave in twenty minutes, but there was no plane at the gate yet. So I walked up to the person at the podium and asked how long our flight would be delayed. He looked at the little screen in front of him and answered that they were still showing it being on time. I asked where the plane was. He looked at the little screen again and after a few keystrokes answered it was still on the ground in Los Angeles. I asked when was it supposed to have left Los Angeles to come to Seattle. A few more keystrokes and he answered three hours ago. What were they thinking claiming my flight would still be on time at that point? Were they counting on the plane finding a wormhole between Los Angeles and Seattle to make up the three hours it was already late?

EILEEN

Tell me more. How did you meet your wife?

EVERETT

I was initially renting when I first moved to Seattle. I had no social life there. Single, black women are not as common in that part of the country. I told you about the girl I had dated throughout high school, but we drifted apart when she went out of town for college and I stayed here.

EILEEN

I remember.

EVERETT

Well, one evening I was home, feeling very lonely, sitting in front of a roaring fire -- with no fireplace -- and I called her up. And that was that.

EILEEN

What do you mean, "that was that." You're leaving out all the fun stuff.

EVERETT

Yeah, it did seem like we left out all the fun stuff. It felt like the next thing I knew I was back here for the wedding, a half dozen of my former soccer teammates were in the church, there were the "I do"'s and the "You may now kiss the bride," and my buddies screamed out in unison, "Goooooaaaaaalllllllllll," and that's about all I recall. We bought a house -- in Seattle. I always wanted to have a house with a garden; but, unfortunately, our house is situated so that we don't get much sun.

EILEEN

(incredulously)

How is it situated?

EVERETT

In Seattle. Didn't I mention that?

EILEEN

(hopefully)

Kids?

EVERETT

It seemed like we left out the fun stuff there, too. We very quickly found ourselves with three kids, until we figured out where they were coming from and put a stop to that.

(using two fingers pointed at his crotch,
he imitates a scissors snipping)

We've had to keep remodeling the house to make additional cubby holes to store each newly arrived kid.

Where are you living?

EILEEN

Less than a mile from where I grew up. I've never lived anywhere else but here -- commuted to college, now I have a job teaching high school science in the same high school I graduated from. I was set up with my husband through a friend. He's always lived here, too. I had to marry someone who was part of the "community," of course -- another part of being "old school." We haven't faced that same need to do any remodeling, obviously, which I guess I should be grateful for, considering... My husband tries to do little things around the house, but his high school graduating class voted him most likely to hurt himself if allowed to use power tools. And he can be so oblivious at times.

EILEEN (Cont.)

(using a lot of hand gestures to
help tell the story)

One time I was in the living room and noticed him go back and forth in front of me between the guest room and the dining room, each time walking past the bathroom between those two rooms. He had a tape measure and a pencil. Then I heard him drilling a hole in the wall of the guest room. Then he walked past the bathroom again and drilled a hole in the dining room wall and started to feed wires through that hole. He walked back and forth a few more times with a flashlight. Finally, I realized he was trying to find the wires he had fed into the wall so he could pull them through from the dining room to the guest room.

I said quietly, "Honey, you've been drilling into the bathtub." He looked at me like I was speaking Swahili. I pointed at the bathroom he had been walking past over and over again. It finally dawned on him. Needless to say, we don't talk about that unfortunate incident.

EVERETT

Don't be too hard on him. I have done my fair share of incredibly dumb things.

The first time I had to attend a meeting down at the manufacturing plant -- I had never been in a facility like that -- after the meeting, I needed to go to the bathroom, desperately. I found a bathroom on one of the shop floors. There was a large doorway to enter this huge room, but no doors. Straight ahead was this round trough, maybe ten feet across, with pedals on the floor under the trough every few feet around it. I had never seen a urinal like that.

I wasn't surprised they would have such a large urinal in a manufacturing plant, but I was surprised that these days, with women more likely to be in the workforce than when that building was first built, they would still have no doors. I considered looking for a bathroom with more privacy, but, like I said, I was desperate. So I at least turned my back to the doorway in case some lady walked by.

I barely started when I heard a sound behind me, glanced over my shoulder and saw that a man was entering through the open doorway. I expected he would also be using the urinal, but heard nothing else. So I glanced over my shoulder again and for the first time noticed that there was another, smaller doorway leading into an adjacent room. Apparently, that was where the other man had disappeared.

In fixating on the trough in front of me when I desperately entered the bathroom and trying to figure out how to deal with that, I never looked to my left as I entered the room, so I walked past the entrance to the other room and never saw it. The trough wasn't a urinal. It was a communal sink, and each pedal operated a faucet for washing hands, not for flushing. I hadn't figured that out, either, until that man disappeared into the adjacent room.

EVERETT (Cont.)

Meanwhile, I was trying to get done as fast as possible to avoid additional embarrassment when the other guy would come back. But, ...

EILEEN

(interrupting)

There was a good reason why you were desperate.

EVERETT

I heard a flushing sound coming from the other room and panicked. What would I do, what would I say?

EILEEN

You had nothing to worry about. Most guys don't wash their hands after using the bathroom.

EVERETT

(astonished)

You got that right. The guy walked out of the other room and straight back into the shop area. I finally finished, washed my hands there, and slunk away.

EILEEN

Aside from that, do you like Seattle?

EVERETT

It's good. But living there gives me the shakes.

EILEEN

I've read about that Cascadia earthquake the Northwest is trying to prepare for. That's frightening.

EVERETT

No. We live with that. No matter where you go, Mother Nature is ready to be a real mother.

I meant I have the shakes because there are a hundred coffee shops per acre. Every witch's gingerbread house in the deepest, darkest woods is now a coffee shop. I find myself drinking way too much of it.

You used to work out religiously. Do you still do that?

EILEEN

No, I don't work out anymore. I read that if you spend ten hours per week working out, you can add as much as five years to your life expectancy. That sounded great, until I did the calculation and found that working out ten hours per week would be equivalent to six years of my life. So I quit and saved myself a year.

But I'm thinking I may have to join a gym, after all.

(SERVER 1 approaches, stands at their table, and starts listening in on their conversation)

EILEEN

I received an invitation last month to attend some banquet where I would be handed some silly teaching award. At first, I decided to skip it; but when I told my husband about it, he really wanted us to go. So I gave in and mailed the RSVP. The day of the banquet arrived and I reread the invitation for the first time since I had originally dismissed going. The invitation said formal attire. I have no formal attire, I don't need any, and I didn't have time to run out and buy any. That left me with two choices: my wedding dress or what I wore to my high school senior prom many years and several additional pounds ago. I spent an hour forcing myself to take slow, deep breaths.

SERVER 1

You were that nervous?

EILEEN

No. I was stocking up on oxygen because I knew I wasn't going to be able to breathe once I squeezed myself into that prom dress.

EVERETT

(to SERVER 1)

See, how she does that?. She pulls you in to her stories and then chops your head off. If she weren't so damn honest, she could have been the greatest con artist in the world and I could have been her handler.

(the body language of EILEEN and EVERETT reveal that both immediately caught the unintended double entendre, and that both are trying to ignore it; though SERVER 1 is oblivious to it all)

SERVER 1

Do you two want anything else?

EILEEN

No, thank you.

EVERETT

No, thanks.

SERVER 1

Just give me a nod if you change your mind.

(SERVER 1 leaves)

EVERETT

(while glancing over his shoulder toward the just-now becoming illuminated left stage)

Why do we do this?

(EILEEN'S face betrays that she wonders whether EVERETT means something rather personal, between the two of them, but he doesn't notice her facial expression change because of still looking away)

EVERETT

(turning back to her just after she recovers her normal facial expression in time to not betray what she was wondering)

Why do people enjoy regaling each other with stories?

EILEEN

Storytelling is older than written history. I don't know, maybe it's what binds people together.

(EVERETT looks back over his shoulder again at the table now fully illuminated on left stage, with BARBARA and DAN seated there in silence, BARBARA to the left, both picking at their dinners in front of them in silence)

EVERETT

I wonder what their story is. I'm guessing it's a brother and sister and he is trying to be supportive as she needs to talk about problems with her husband.

EILEEN

I'll guess it's a married couple who have run out of things to say to each other.

(they both awkwardly notice it is getting late and they each need to be going, as their conversation fades out, along with the illumination of their right stage; and sound fades in for this segment)

BARBARA

(trying to break the silence)

It seemed like the lighting was not as bright as usual in the parking lot. I didn't feel very safe there.

DAN

(jumping into that topic wholeheartedly, like a teacher who was asked a good question)

That's why I keep harping on the need for more and better security cameras in public, everywhere in public needs to be covered by cameras.

BARBARA

(passive aggressively)

I'm not sure which would be worse, feeling unsafe off camera or on camera.

DAN

You're concerned about loss of privacy from security cameras? You see it as a trade-off between rights versus security. It's not. It's a trade-off between rights versus rights -- the right to be safe versus the right to privacy. The right to be safe is every bit as important as privacy. Besides, there can't be a loss of privacy on a public street -- no one has privacy on a public street to begin with.

BARBARA

(beginning to over-react because
of emotions roiling beneath the surface)

I'm not willing to be blackmailed by such a trade. It's like having to pay taxes to offer job training for convicts who squandered their K through 12 opportunity that we already paid for with taxes. We're left with the choice between either the convicts get released back on the street with no chance of doing anything other than more crime, or we pay yet again to try to teach them how to be law-abiding productive citizens. Either way we pay.

DAN

(condescendingly)

So, what are you saying? Are you rejecting security cameras because we already paid for K through 12 education for those who turned into criminals?

BARBARA

(erupting)

What?! Didn't you even listen to what I said?

(tense silence)

DAN

You're being overly emotional.

BARBARA

Maybe it's about time you tapped in to some emotion. If you can't muster any of your own then try some of mine. We're nearly done with dinner and we haven't talked at all. You're the one who said -- no, insisted -- that we come here tonight to talk this through. Well, like always, we do what you say because you always insist on us doing what you say. Alright, I'm here. Where are you?

DAN

(manipulatively looking pitiable)

You hurt me terribly. I need to know what you want now.

BARBARA

I answered that question last night. Do you think I was lying? I didn't sleep last night. I haven't been able to concentrate at work. I've just been thinking about this and imagining what I want to say and imagining what you might say. We're here because you would not allow us to discuss this at home in case the children would hear us. But I think you wanted this in a public place so I would have to keep my voice down and avoid making a scene. Fine. You got your way, like always. But I'm not going home without discussing this. I've had it with imagining.

DAN

It hasn't been any easier for me today. I've wrestled with this all day, too.

BARBARA

And yet you've been sitting here for the past hour as if nothing happened. Why? Making me suffer as long as possible? Is that it?

DAN

(sternly spitting back)

I wasn't the adulterer.

BARBARA

(sitting back and more calmly)

That's correct. I was. And I ended it. And I told you about it last night. Now where do we go from here?

DAN

You don't sound like you want to save our marriage.

BARBARA

I told you last night I don't want to end our marriage. That was the truth. I want to work through this. What do you want?

DAN

Did I miss the signs, or were you just really good at deception? Is that what ended your other marriage?

BARBARA

(exasperated)

Now, for the first time, you want to know about my former marriage? Alright. I felt I could save him -- help him become a better man. Eventually I couldn't put up any more with him being so self centered and unwilling or unable to provide any emotional support in return. I never was able to help him. I just enabled him to stay the way he was. But I never had an extra-marital affair -- not until this one.

DAN

Why didn't you tell me sooner?

BARBARA

Sooner? You haven't asked me anything about the affair. Not one question. You have no idea how long it lasted and you ask me why I didn't tell you sooner?

It was one, unplanned tryst, in a moment of weakness, yesterday afternoon. How much sooner would you have liked me to tell you?

(she imitates speaking to her lover)

Excuse me. Are you done, cause I need to call my husband and let him know we just consummated an affair.

DAN

You didn't jump into the sack out of the clear blue. The need to be with another man had to be building over time. You could have told me something was wrong. You didn't.

BARBARA

(introspectively)

No, I didn't. If I had tried, how well would that have gone? Would you have scolded me for feeling emotions? -- or for expressing needs which did not measure up to your standards of rationality and logic?

DAN

I'm not emotional enough for you? So when you said you wanted to save our marriage despite your tryst, as you call it, was that on the condition that I change into a water balloon of emotions? You would prefer to have to tiptoe around me all the time, afraid I might explode?

BARBARA

All emotions have to be negative and dangerous. Is that what you believe?

DAN

No, but when you're a slave to emotions, you can't just decide only good emotions will be permitted. If a person is prone to an uncontrolled giggling fit, that person is also prone to an uncontrolled sobbing fit. It's the story of Pandora's Box. Love gone bad results in hatred for the former lover. When one is passionate for a lover, one feels jealousy and insecurity about losing the lover. Would you want me to be furiously jealous and hate you now?

BARBARA

I would have wanted you to be passionately in love with me.

(silent pause)

DAN

Why did you agree to marry me? I'm not different now than I was then.

BARBARA

I saw in you a pillar I could rely on when my strength might falter. Someone who would be my partner, rather than another child.

DAN

Did I not live up to your expectations?

BARBARA

(growing agitated)

Yes. You did. But people change, Dan. At least people other than you. I change. I'm sorry to disappoint you but I am still learning about me, about what's important for me, what I need. I need to be needed. You don't need me, do you?

DAN

I want you. Isn't that better?

(silent pause while BARBARA's countenance changes from plaintive to pensive)

DAN

(beginning as if apologizing but the rest of the sentence makes it clear he is not)

Sorry, I need to use the bathroom.

(he leaves toward the rear of the stage and, as soon as he is gone from sight, GARY comes from off stage and sits in the third, unused chair at the table, which has its back to the audience; the audience never sees GARY's face)

BARBARA

(startled and dismayed)

No! Why are you here? You can't be here. Leave, now!

GARY

I had to see you.

BARBARA

(beginning deliberately but ending frantically, while nervously glancing between GARY and the direction DAN had gone)

I told you. I made a mistake. I can't do that again, ever. It wasn't fair to you, I'm sorry, but it wasn't right. Now you have to leave before my husband comes back. How did you know I would be here?

GARY

I followed you from work. I know -- I shouldn't have. I am not going to make a scene. I'll be gone before your husband returns. But I ... I just needed you to know, being with you was wonderful. If it's not to be, I'll accept that. I'm not a stalker.

BARBARA

(sternly)

All evidence to the contrary.

GARY

Alright, yes, I did; but just this time. Please, give me one chance. That's all I ask. Don't go straight home after dinner. Meet me at the bookstore down the street.

BARBARA

That's in the opposite direction from where I parked my car. Dan would know something is up.

GARY

You can say you need to buy a gift at the bookstore for a friend.

BARBARA

(unconvincingly)

Dan and I are going to work this out. I'm not leaving him.

GARY

When you confided in me over lunch yesterday, it was special. You looked so lovely, even with the tears in your eyes. Please, let me tell you what I feel now -- how much you mean to me. Then, I'll accept your decision. I swear. I can live without you if I have to, but I cannot live without you and without having told you how I feel.

BARBARA

You have to leave, now!

GARY

I'll wait at the bookstore for you. Please come. It won't take long.

(GARY leaves hurriedly, barely before DAN returns, calmly walking past a returning DAN without any eye contact nor acknowledgement between them)

DAN

(after sitting)

You feeling alright?

(the other table, on right stage, gradually becomes illuminated, revealing JUDY and MARY seated at their table, with MARY to the right, menus in hand, having a pleasant, relaxed conversation, though not yet heard by anyone)

BARBARA

(absently staring toward right stage)

No. I mean I'm fine. I was noticing ... the table over there ... the two women at the table over there.

DAN

(glancing over his shoulder furtively)

What about them?

BARBARA

They struck me as two former co-workers meeting for drinks after work, one having been laid off recently, needing reassurance. What do you guess?

DAN

(glancing over his shoulder again)

I don't know.

I'll catch the waiter's eye and have him bring the check. We need to be getting home.

(as the sound and illumination fades out from left stage, the sound fades in from right stage)

MARY

I'm sorry, I need to stop and tell you this. This is really strange. Don't look now. There's a couple across the way and something odd happened a couple of moments ago.

JUDY

"Odd" as in scary? Do we need to call the police?

MARY

I don't think so. I hope not. The guy left for a little while and some other guy who had been sitting by himself at the bar watching the couple intently rushed over, sat down, and had a charged conversation with the woman. He left just before the first guy returned. Then the woman was staring intently at us with a vacant look on her face.

JUDY

(concern growing into agitation)

What? Why was she staring at us?

MARY

I can't begin to guess why. After the guy returned, she stopped staring, but then the guy glanced over here, trying to be inconspicuous -- (sarcastically) like a guy could look at a woman inconspicuously. I'm pretty sure they were talking about us.

JUDY

(glancing over that way)

I don't recognize either of them. Do you?

(MARY slowly shakes her head)

JUDY

That's a little creepy, don't you think?

MARY

Maybe they realize we're lesbians.

JUDY

(fidgeting nervously)

Oh yeah. I'm sure they can tell. I'm positively mortified. It must be because we've broken the second cardinal rule of closeted fashion -- two women wearing similar colors.

MARY

Dead give away, every time.

He's paying the check, so I expect they will be leaving soon, in any event. She looks normal now -- maybe a bit sad, but that's what goes for normal nowadays, right? It was probably nothing. Maybe she was not staring at us as much as just staring off into space in our direction.

JUDY

But you said he looked at us, too?

MARY

(shrugging it off)

Yeah, I don't know. Whatever.

JUDY

(determinedly regaining her composure)

You were saying before you rudely interrupted yourself, ...

MARY

I was? What was I saying? Oh, never mind.

(they look at their menus)

JUDY

I am constantly seeing food scares du jour. I can't even enjoy a meal anymore because every food has been implicated as dangerous by some study.

JUDY (Cont.)

What gets to me the most is when a study claims something causes cancer and you read on to find the claim is based on accelerated life testing on rats. They use barely a handful of the poor creatures that have been specially bred to develop cancer, and stuff them with some test chemical at millions of times greater dosage than one would ever encounter normally. I'm sure the only substance that so-called researchers have failed to demonstrate causes cancer in rats is rat poison. And I'm equally sure there's an effort on-going as we speak to breed cancer-prone rats that are immune to rat poison, so we can finally fill in the last, gaping pit in our knowledge of what causes cancer. Please change the subject. I hate getting all irate about silly things. Did you figure out what to do about e-mail?

MARY

Yes, but it was exasperating. It never occurred to me that an internet service provider would suddenly stop providing internet service. Who ever heard of such a thing? I finally learned enough jargon to figure out what to look for in a new e-mail account, and after embarrassingly too much researching and testing and experimenting and tweaking of settings and "rinse and repeat," I've finally got a replacement working right. I'll send you a message with the new address. I was fat, dumb, and happy before I had to learn all about that. Now, fat is all that remains.

JUDY

Silly girl, you know fat is merely a state of mind.

MARY

Not since some Medieval torturer invented the bathroom scale.

JUDY

Alright. We need to change the subject again. Tell me the latest stories from work.

MARY

There's a woman at work who always wears her hair in a braided pony tail. Always. I've never seen her with any other hair style. Today, I overheard her recommending her hairdresser to another woman. Like, how challenging could it be to be that woman's hairdresser?

(using her hands like in charades, she depicts taking a shoulder-length pony tail in one hand and clipping off the tip of it, ending with a facial expression and gesture of the arms/hands to signify success)

Tadah!

Before that, she was carrying on about how much she loved going to a concert by -- I don't remember the name -- it was one of the never-ending string of female vocalists who sing by

MARY (Cont.)

combining two of the worst female tendencies: whining and screaming. I bet there aren't many male fans of that style of singing.

(in a forced, deep voice, with
a low-class accent)

Ain't takin' the wife to that bitch's concert -- my wife don't need no lessons, thank you.
Speaking of what I hear while working, I have to ask whether you applied for the job at the fitness center.

JUDY

Right, yeah. ... No. ... Well, I haven't decided yet.

MARY

How hard of a decision could this be? You've been agonizing over it for a week. Why don't you just apply? Then, if you don't get an offer, you can be thrilled you won't have to also agonize over whether to take the job.

JUDY

Guilty as charged. I do tend to over think things -- don't I?

MARY

You? If you were dying of thirst in the desert and came across a water fountain, you would stand there wondering whether it was working rather than push the button.

JUDY

(gently smacking Mary on the
arm with the menu)

You know I wouldn't take such abuse from anyone else.
It's just ... you know ... we're there three times a week, for several months now, and we know everybody who works there, and my applying would put everybody in an awkward situation if they feel they'd rather not hire me.

MARY

You're applying for a job, not asking a co-worker out on a date. No, seriously. I see your point.

JUDY

Thank you.

MARY

I have to tell you, though, I cannot believe you would be turned down if you do apply; and I think you know that. Are you just not sure you're ready to go back to work yet?

JUDY

Mary, I'm not sure of anything right now. The kids are really gone -- finally. They don't need me to be mom any longer. Where do we go from here?

MARY

Have you talked to James about it? The kids probably don't need him to be dad anymore, either -- except for handing over spending cash for the youngest now that she's starting college, of course.

JUDY

He's thrilled to get them out of the house. He works, he has his buddies, his hobbies. It's really just one less distraction for him now that the youngest is out the door.

MARY

But you're needing a new purpose, so you can look forward to each day and feel like you did something good at the end of each day. Is that it?

JUDY

I guess so. I'm still a wife. But I've been mom and he's been dad so long. I'm not sure what it means to be just a wife now. That sounds kind of pitiful, doesn't it?
I never asked you, do you ever wish you had kids?

MARY

The short answer is, "No." The long answer is, "Hell no."
I must be missing a gene or something. I honestly never felt a desire to have children. I've heard more than one woman say she went through a time in her early twenties when her arms would ache longingly if she saw a woman holding an infant. Did you experience that?

JUDY

No, but then I didn't have time. We were married right out of high school and we were parents five months later.
I always assumed I would have children, I guess.

MARY

Doesn't everyone when we're growing up?

JUDY

You know, when I was a child, I became convinced grown-ups were all part of a plot against children. I swore when I grew up and was let in on the plot, I would reveal it to the children of the world.

MARY

I take it you were disappointed at some point when you figured out there was no such plot.

JUDY

Of course there is. And I became a co-conspirator as soon as my first child learned to understand language.

MARY

What are you talking about?

JUDY

(as if speaking to a toddler)

Oh, you have to go to bed now because your bed told me it misses you and it's been very lonely since your nap. But if you don't eat your peas, the farmer will cry -- he worked so hard to grow those peas for you.

(back to normal speech)

How do our children forgive us once they figure out how we manipulated them?

MARY

(playfully sarcastic)

By George, you've figured out why children are so nasty to adults during the teenage years-- that's how they get even with us.

(becoming serious)

Actually, I never thought of it as some grand plot of parents against their children, but now that you explained it, yeah, I guess it is.

JUDY

But the manipulation doesn't end there. Our parents expect us to be there for them in their old age and we likewise expect the same of our kids. It's an unconscionable, one-sided contract which every generation gets roped into without the opportunity to make an informed decision. At some moments, I swear I'll never burden my kids with helping me in my old age, but then I get scared when I contemplate facing old age without someone I can trust and rely on. Do you ever think about that?

MARY

I have, sometimes -- only when someone asks me.

JUDY

Sorry.

MARY

No, I don't mean that in a bad way. Of course getting older is scary, and one can feel less scared believing there'll be someone to trust; but there's no guarantee the person you count on to be there will be there. Things can change, in a lot of ways. Not every grown child chooses to remain bound by that contract; or they can have their own problems, or be half-a-world away, or worse.

I obviously haven't stumbled on the right reason for bringing children into this world, but cultivating help for my old age doesn't hack it for me.

JUDY

Well, I guess you could say I "stumbled" into having a child. A mother is never allowed to admit to wondering what her life would have been like had she not become a mother. It's a cult thing. We fear we'll be ostracized if we say anything against motherhood.

MARY

There was a young woman at work who bitched and complained constantly about what she was enduring while pregnant -- and it was a particularly difficult pregnancy. Not long after she got back from maternity leave, another co-worker started showing, word got out, and wouldn't you know it, the complainer was the first in line to tell the pregnant woman what a wonderful, blissful, joyful thing it is. I never heard a man tell an expectant father how wonderful it is to deal with pregnancy and delivery.

JUDY

No -- just one of the many differences between men and women.

(pause while JUDY struggles
with something on her mind)

As long as we've been married, it seems like I was always the one modifying my behavior in accordance with his wishes, even anticipating what those wishes might be before he expressed them. But I don't ever express my wishes to him. I don't talk to him about things I've learned which he has no interest in, but I always listen attentively to things he says, whether I care about them or not. If I'm in a bad mood or something bad happens, I suck it up because I don't want to dump on him or the kids. But I'm always the one they bitch to. I feel like, if you love someone, you accept them for who they are and try to change yourself into who they need. And you tolerate it when they fail to suppress their less-than-best side because you love that person, but you avoid inflicting your own less-than-best side on them because you wouldn't take advantage of their love of you.

MARY

We give what we want to get. It's a common behavior. You often hear married people complaining that they feel they are giving more than they get. When you care for someone and you want to give that person what you believe they will appreciate getting, it's natural to give what you yourself would appreciate getting. But if the partners don't share the same values regarding what they are each giving and receiving, they can both feel short-changed even when they are both trying their best to give to each other. You give James an always attentive and tolerant audience, imagining he will greatly appreciate that because you would greatly appreciate receiving that. He never thanks you or acknowledges your effort -- seems to take it for granted. He gives an always sober, faithful provider, imagining you will greatly appreciate receiving that.

JUDY

(nodding while contemplating and then finishing Mary's explanation)

And I take that for granted.

(SERVER 1 approaches)

SERVER 1

One hundred percent of those sitting at this table tonight have been lovely ladies.

MARY

(barely concealing her disapproval of such sexist pandering)

Is that like one of the meaningless statistics on Monday Night Football.

(JUDY squirms, embarrassed because MARY is being confrontational, but SERVER 1 misses her sentiment and commiserates, instead. Mary then forgets her initial reaction and joins in whole-heartedly. Judy gradually relaxes and is entertained, too.)

SERVER 1

Monday Night Football statistics. Definitely. Some guy would return a punt for 60 yards after first fumbling and the announcer gets all excited that this was a new record for punt returns following a fumble on Monday night. Why would anyone care about records that apply only to one night of the week?

MARY

Exactly. But it's not just Monday night. It's all of football now.

(imitating a sportscaster)

Four yard gain. That's the longest run by a full back weighing less than 250 pounds whose name begins with a G while the visiting team was wearing green uniforms.

SERVER 1

But baseball is even worse.

(imitating a sportscaster)

And the rookie gets his fourth home run. That's the eleventh time a rookie has hit four home runs within his first twenty-three at bats.

MARY

No, baseball is the worst. Where else do they compile statistics that are based on grown men playing "Let's Pretend?" You've got scorers sitting there during the game and figuring, "Let's see, two runs scored, but had it not been for the error by the shortstop three batters earlier, one of those runners that

MARY (Cont.)

scored wouldn't have been on base at all and the batter who was up two-at-bats before the last batter of the inning would have been the third out instead of the second, so neither of those runs were 'earned.'" Are you kidding?

SERVER 1

Absolutely. A pitcher's "earned run average" is nuts.

MARY

And they're not even consistent in playing pretend. When an outfielder runs full speed from the instant the batter hits the ball, leaps ten feet into the air, catches the ball as it's about to clear the fence for a home run, crashes into the fence, falls to the ground but somehow holds onto the ball for an out, why isn't the pitcher charged with a home run? If the pitcher is not charged with runs because a fielder makes an error, then charge the pitcher with runs which were prevented only by an incredible fielder's play.

SERVER 1

Yeah, you're right. I hadn't thought about that. How did you learn so much about sports?

MARY

(sarcastically)

You mean for a girl?

SERVER 1

(embarrassed)

Um, well, if you ladies need more time, I'll check back with you soon.

(SERVER 1 leaves. SARDONE and LYLE walk across the lit half of the stage, behind MARY and JUDY, heading off stage from left to right. Sardone is dressed as in the opening scene, which is a costume that will help the audience easily recognize her, so as to help clarify on sight that this is the same character as in the opening scene.)

MARY

(noticing SARDONE and LYLE as she follows SERVER 1 with her eyes)

Tonight's the night for unusual sights here at Does. What do you suppose is going on there?

JUDY

(looking where MARY had looked,
glancing at SARDONE and LYLE
as they walk across the stage,
then speaking flippantly)

A cougar on the prowl?

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF ACT)

ACT II

SETTING: Both halves of the stage are illuminated.
There is an empty table on left stage and a podium on right stage, as in the beginning of Act I.

AT RISE: SARDONE and LYLE are at the podium waiting for the MAITRE D'.

(MAITRE D' approaches SARDONE and LYLE from off stage)

MAITRE D'
(professionally pleasant)
Ms. Sardone, we're so pleased to have you back again. I have your reservation and your table is ready.
(to both)
Welcome to "The Does."

(MAITRE D' leads them to the empty table on left stage as the light dims to dark on right stage)

SARDONE
Paul, this is my friend, Lyle.
(SARDONE, overtly observing MAITRE D's hind quarters, says to LYLE)
All the regulars here at Does are very proud of Paul. He's the first member of his evolutionary branch to master bipedalism.

(MAITRE D' chuckles pleasantly, seats them with SARDONE to the left, and gives them menus)

LYLE
(to SARDONE)
I take it you are one of the regulars here.

SARDONE
This is my second time here today.

(LYLE looks at her in a manner which suggests he is wondering whether she is a lush)

SARDONE
As Paul is my witness, I was here earlier today with my niece; not to get sloshed.

MAITRE D'

And I want to compliment Ms. Stephanie. She seemed like a wonderful young lady. I expect she will make you very proud.

SARDONE

Thank you. I have high hopes for her. She's got some tough decisions to make now.

(to LYLE)

She's graduating from college.

(to both)

She was somewhat distracted today, not surprisingly, but I'd like to believe I was able to reassure her.

MAITRE D'

Your server will be with you shortly.

(MAITRE D' leaves)

SARDONE

My niece might not quite be ready to leave the ivory towers, it seems. She is still so excited about learning.

LYLE

That's wonderful. The thirst for knowledge is admirable. It keeps the brain young. I believe one should strive to learn new things each day.

SARDONE

But my brain holds onto what I learn like a sieve trying to scoop up water. There is a silver lining to that, though. While you strive to find new things to learn each day, I can accomplish the equivalent by simply relearning the same things day after day.

LYLE

And I'll chalk that up as something I learned today.

SARDONE

(reading the menu)

What I did learn recently is to commiserate with infants. I've been eating soft foods for several days now.

LYLE

Please tell me that's not the latest fad diet.

SARDONE

It wouldn't surprise me. But, no, I have been feeling pain on the left side of my jaw whenever I chew on that side. I'm deathly afraid of going to a dentist with any kind of a problem. But yesterday I started getting pain there just from eating chocolate. So now I'll have to see the dentist because I'm afraid this condition could become terminal.

LYLE

It doesn't sound life threatening.

SARDONE

If I can't have chocolate, I'll kill myself.

LYLE

Not being a chocoholic, I'll have to take your word for that. Although, sometimes when I'm driving and feeling a little drowsy, I stop and buy a particularly decadent chocolate bar. It wakes me up.

SARDONE

Wakes you up? No, you should luxuriate with a particularly decadent chocolate bar, like in a trance. The only way a decadent chocolate bar could keep me awake at the wheel is if I stash it in the trunk so that I would have to get to my destination safely in order to enjoy it.

LYLE

Well, anyway, it sounds like you have a hairline crack in one of your teeth. Cracked teeth don't heal themselves. They only get worse. You will need to go to a dentist.

SARDONE

Please tell me you're not a professional shill for some dental office in town. Actually, what do you do? -- I mean, when you're not doing this.

LYLE

For starters, I'm a personal trainer.

SARDONE

I hired a personal trainer once. He didn't approve of my attitude and quit part way through the first session.

LYLE

A smart personal trainer requires that his or her clients be serious about meeting their goals; otherwise the clients become disillusioned, drop out, and often blame the trainer when talking to their friends. That's not good for the client or the trainer. Still, not completing a single session with a client is unusual. What did you do to scare him off so fast?

SARDONE

He was trying to teach me how to do sit ups his way and was growing frustrated with the way I was doing them. He said, "I wish you'd give me one great sit up rather than ten crappy ones." I said, "I hate to break this to you. There is no Jiminy Cricket, so wishing ain't gonna make your dreams come true."

LYLE

(chuckling)

Yeah, that would do it. I also hire myself out as a guide for wilderness camping. Are you into camping?

SARDONE

My idea of camping is when room service is late.
What else do you do with your time?

LYLE

I also coach a high school shooting team.

SARDONE

Shooting? Like in guns?

LYLE

As opposed to ...?

SARDONE

(enjoying her own unintended
double entendre)

What does a coach of a shooting team do?

(slightly mockingly and
mimicking LYLE's voice)

Good shot, Johnny. You missed the bull's eye by only two inches to the left. On the next shot, do the exact same thing but aim two inches more to the right.

OK, remember: take a half breath, hold, then squeeze; half breath, hold, squeeze.

LYLE

(taking it well, but replying with
a tinge of sarcastic earnestness)

I coach shooting, not Lamaze.

SARDONE

(after enjoying his response)

Candice told me she wasn't seeing you anymore, but I didn't ask for any details. Is everything alright there?

LYLE

I don't discuss clients or prospective clients with anyone -- past, present, or future -- whether I'm training or escorting. I'm sure you appreciate that, too.

SARDONE

In case you're curious, she must have been "serious about meeting her goals," because she spoke highly of you.

LYLE

Thank you.

SARDONE

Look, to be honest, I've never done this before and I don't know whether this is supposed to be more like a first date or a job interview. And if it's more like a job interview, who's interviewing whom?

LYLE

Think of it as whichever you feel more comfortable and, later, we'll both get to decide.

SARDONE

I've been married often enough to rival a Hollywood star, so I'm no stranger to first dates. I'll think of it that way. I should warn you I tend to be rather direct. I screen what I'm about to say like a prospector panning for gold with a hula hoop.

LYLE

Being direct is not necessarily a bad thing.

SARDONE

Once, I asked a guy on a first date how big he is. He was stunned by the question; but then he answered, anyway. I haven't asked that question since, though; because I learned something very important later that night. Men don't know how to read a ruler. Actually, I wonder whether men just don't realize that you're supposed to measure starting from the zero, not starting from the six.

(SERVER 2 approaches)

SERVER 2

(perfunctorily)

Hey you guys. My name is Dana. I'll be serving you tonight. Can I start you off with something to drink?

(SARDONE looks her up and down)

SARDONE

(harmlessly)

You're new.

(SERVER 2 looks SARDONE up and down)

SERVER 2

(matter-of-factly)

You're not.

SARDONE

(excitedly pleased, speaking to LYLE)

The gauntlet has been thrown.

(to SERVER 2)

This must be your first job since dropping out of fifth grade.

SERVER 2

(rising to the contest confidently,
but not angrily)

Public education has been extended beyond elementary school since you were a child. I graduated high school, thank you very much.

SARDONE

GED or teacher's pet?

SERVER 2:

Yes, they do pet don't they? But I bet I didn't need to encourage my teachers as much as you had to encourage yours.

SARDONE

Is that how you got this job, too?

SERVER 2

Whatever it takes to break through the glass ceiling.

SARDONE

Then I have good news. If you do make it to the top of the corporate ladder here at "The Does," you won't have to relocate. Corporate headquarters is in the closet between the bathrooms.

LYLE

Ladies. May I? I would like a gin and tonic, please.

SARDONE

(grudgingly ending the repartee)

Same for me.

(SERVER 2 leaves, with a smile
escaping, while SARDONE scrutinizes
her as she leaves)

SARDONE

(enlightened)

Did you see her smile as she left? Just as I suspected. Paul put her up to that. He hired a feisty one he knew I would enjoy sparring with and told her to challenge me. That was so sweet of him.

LYLE

Sweet? You enjoy that kind of confrontation.

SARDONE

When it's in jest, certainly. It's a game, not a confrontation. Don't you spar with buddies about sports? -- which team is the best, which players are the best? And don't you kid around with white friends, making one-liner remarks about each other's race?

LYLE

Yes to the sports analogy, definitely no to the race analogy.

SARDONE

What matters is not the remark, it's the intent behind the remark. When it's all in fun, it's harmless.

LYLE

There's always at least some truth behind everything. Those one-liner remarks are based on stereotypes.

SARDONE

Yes, everyone uses stereotypes in interacting with others. You expect something different from a teenager than from a much older person, and your first interaction with a teenager would be disastrous if you treat the teenager the way you would treat a much older person, and vice versa. Stereotypes can be helpful. Then, as we learn more about the person, we gradually replace the stereotype with what we learn. If the teenager acts maturely -- first you faint from the shock, of course -- but then you stop assuming it is pointless to reason with her. If you don't, if you continue to treat her as if she conformed to your stereotype of teenagers, then that becomes bad prejudice.

LYLE

(mildly challenging)

You said you met your niece here today and she is graduating college. She recently transitioned from being a teenager to a young adult I take it. In what ways did you adjust your stereotype of your niece as she grew out of being a teenager?

SARDONE

(slightly defensively)

That's not entirely fair. It's hard to recall all the changes I made to my image of her over the years. And that image continues to change as I listen to her and learn ...

(she drifts off, replaying in her mind the earlier rendezvous with Stephanie, but now more observant of what transpired in retrospect, then snaps out of it, but says nothing more and displays a demeanor which suggests she does not wish to discuss that further)

LYLE

(trying to alleviate the awkward silence)

That's not what I saw of prejudice when I was growing up.

SARDONE

(recovering)

Are you from around here?

LYLE

Sort of -- a small, rural town about a hundred miles from here. But I moved here when I finished school. Small towns are -- small.

SARDONE

I grew up in a small town, too. They took pride in their friendliness -- but that was only shared among those who were born there. And neighbors always looking out for each other? Hah! When a building caught fire, no sooner had the fire trucks arrived then the locals came running -- carrying their lawn chairs. Biggest show in town. Where do you like to go? Do you enjoy comedy clubs?

LYLE

For the most part. There are some comedians I just don't get, then there are others who are fantastic. I look around the room sometimes and notice other people reacting to the comedians exactly the opposite.

SARDONE

I don't get the comedians who use foul language excessively.

LYLE

Are you prudish?

SARDONE

(looking at him askance)

Prudishness and I were companions early on, but she took a hike after I gave my boyfriend a birthday gift in the back seat of his father's Oldsmobile. Remember that advertising campaign that Oldsmobile tried just before they went out of business? -- "It's not your father's Oldsmobile anymore." I think that if Oldsmobile had continued to make cars like his father's Oldsmobile, they'd be at the top of Fortune 500 today. No, it's just that when a comedian, or anyone, uses foul language constantly, it gets boring.

LYLE

You got it. Every language contains vulgar words, because they serve a purpose. They carry the ability to shock and so allow one to express strong emotion. But if those words get used too often, they lose their shock value. On the other hand, if one never uses those words, there's no outlet left but to scream. How is that better?

SARDONE

It's not.

(SERVER 2 returns and sets their drinks in front of them)

SERVER 2

Are you ready to order?

LYLE

I'm not, are you?

(SARDONE shakes her head)

LYLE

Would you give us a few more minutes, please?

SERVER 2

(to SARDONE)

I can bring you a children's menu, it has fewer choices to deal with and the print is larger.

SARDONE

Excellent idea. That way, at least you'd be completely familiar with the food on that menu in case I have any questions.

(SERVER 2 gives her a look that says, "you got me," then leaves)

LYLE

Do you enjoy sex?

SARDONE

(barely suppressing shock)

I clearly don't hold the patent on asking direct questions.

LYLE

You said you gave your boyfriend a present for his birthday. Was that all it was for you? -- a present for him?

SARDONE

(muses before answering, then responds pensively and tentatively)

Back then, yeah, that's all it was -- a present. A few years later, maybe it was a way to be popular. It's been a lure, at times. It's been an obligation, too often. Now, I'm at a point in my life where I just want it to be fun. No head trips, no ties, no expectations -- just fun.

(she feels vulnerable and nervously changes the topic)

We need to figure out what to order before the Tasmanian Devil returns.

(SARDONE looks to see if SERVER 2 is near but becomes distracted by the table on right stage which was gradually becoming illuminated, revealing BILL and MARK seated at their table, with MARK to the right, in spirited conversation)

SARDONE

When I was here earlier today with my niece, she explained a hobby of hers she called "people storying." You try to imagine the story behind people who look interesting. I didn't think much of it at first, but I'm beginning to think maybe there's something to it, after all.

(pointing discreetly)

You see the two guys at that table? I see two co-workers trying to blow off the stresses of life before heading home, even though they know their wives are going to scold them for staying out after work. What do you see?

LYLE

(realizes he's being tested
but plays along)

I see a consultant and a prospective client, learning whether they would be a good match for each other.

(they turn back to their menus
as their conversation and
illumination fade out)

LYLE

You being the regular here, what do you recommend?

(sound fades in for the other table)

MARK

I've noticed the same trend. All the faculty in our department are required to serve as guidance counselors, with each assigned a small number of undergraduate history majors. Over the years, it seems to me that the students have become more prone to assume all they have to do is get a college degree and they're in fat city.

BILL

And statistics show more and more so the opposite is true. I would interview job applicants who hadn't done any research on our company, were dumbfounded when I asked what they could contribute to our business, and had no questions of their own. We're not adequately teaching this generation what it takes to achieve success.

MARK

No argument there; although, I am disgusted when I see those with connections and BS artists succeeding effortlessly while others struggle diligently despite the lack of financial or moral support. It's easy to draw a very different conclusion as to what it actually takes to get ahead compared to what we were taught it takes.

BILL

No argument with that either. I got a call recently from some guy who used to work for me. He came across as confident, which is imperative in the field of sales; but I gradually realized he was a pathological liar and I eventually confronted him on it. He immediately quit, which saved me from having to fire him.

MARK

And he called you now?

BILL

Yeah! It's been a dozen years since I had seen him or even spoken to him, and he called me out of the blue -- as if our "little disagreement" had never happened. He asked about how the company was doing, obviously not aware I recently retired.

MARK

What did he want?

BILL

I imagine he was looking for a job, again. He probably burned his bridges anywhere and everywhere he's been since he left. Anyway, I don't know and I don't care. I said we have nothing to discuss and hung up.

MARK

Where was your curiosity? Why didn't you learn enough to gloat if it turned out you were right about his motive and experiences. Or at least you could have used the opportunity to tell him off.

BILL

I told him off more than I should have back then. I was not going to compound my sin any further. The Lord does not want us to judge our fellow man, but sometimes it is difficult to comply with that behest.

MARK

(condescendingly)

Of course you prayed for forgiveness for your sin of hanging up on a person who has the ethics, morals, and conscience of pond scum.

BILL

(charitably)

And I prayed for our Lord to forgive him for his sins, too.

MARK

By praying for the Lord to forgive him for his sins, didn't you judge that he sinned? Isn't it hypocritical to ask forgiveness for having judged him at the same time you judge him?

BILL

Mark, you always find ways to see the worst in the worship of our Lord. It's never too late to open your heart to our Lord; and, as they say, "There's no time like the present."

MARK

(knowingly)

Why might the present be a particularly good time, Bill?

BILL

Gina talked to me, but don't blame her. She's worried. She's scared. So are your kids. So am I. You pretend nothing happened. You won't talk about it with anyone. Your family doesn't know where your head is at. We all need to work through this together, but you're shutting us all out.

MARK

Shutting you all out of what? -- out of the despair? out of the consternation over trying to make a decision between one option which is terrible and the other option which will be even worse, when there's no knowing which option will be which? I'm shielding you all for your own benefit. I won't burden anyone with this.

BILL

But those who love you need to share all of that. We need to help you with making the decision and getting through it all, together.

MARK

Even if you're correct and I'm wrong about what's best for everyone, I want it this way. I'm the one who is dying here, Bill. I think I have the right to be a little selfish now.

BILL

And now it's my turn to point out hypocrisy. What happened to shielding everyone for our benefit?

MARK

The decision was mine to make and we're not going to waste the remaining time we all have together with fighting and moping.

BILL

You said, "was mine to make." You already made the decision?

MARK

I'm not going through all that witch doctor crap to maybe delay the inevitable by what amounts to a few days if I'm "lucky," and becoming too sick in the process to make the most of whatever days I have left.

BILL

But with God's help, you could be in remission. Isn't that worth trying?

MARK

(sarcastically)

With God's help. Sure. Because prayer works. But it only works rarely and randomly. I wonder why. And if the witch doctor crap puts me in remission for a little while, it would have to be because God made it work, correct? And we would all thank God for the miracle of remission because God, being omniscient, knows I have cancer and because God, being omnipotent, has the power to make me live or let me die. But if there is an omniscient and omnipotent god, nothing happens without that god knowing about it and at the very least allowing it to happen. So God gave me cancer. Shouldn't we also blame God for giving me cancer, Bill? When I hear someone beset by horrific woes thanking God that it wasn't worse than it is, it sounds like a battered spouse thanking her abuser for not yet having murdered her. That's pathetic.

BILL

How would it hurt you to embrace the Lord? You have nothing to lose and so much to gain.

MARK

The old Pascal's wager argument -- if God exists and you didn't please Him while you were alive, you are risking your immortal soul. Therefore, it's a much less risky bet to worship God because so little was ventured in doing so if it turns out He doesn't exist after all.

BILL

I hadn't heard of that wager, but it makes a lot of sense.

MARK

Does it? Worship Him how? Devout Catholics believe you are not pleasing Him because you don't worship Him correctly. Devout Muslims believe you and the Catholics are both blowing your one chance at salvation. In fact, there are probably at least a billion people who believe as confidently as you do that you are not pleasing God in the way you have chosen to worship Him and are therefore putting your immortal soul in peril. Are they all wrong and you're correct?

BILL

However God wants us to worship Him, there has to be a God. There has to be a purpose behind our being here. It can't be that we're just an accident.

MARK

What proof do you have of that?

BILL

Belief despite the absence of proof is the definition of faith.

MARK

Belief in obstinate contradiction of overwhelming evidence is the definition of self-delusion.

BILL

There is no evidence that God doesn't exist.

MARK

I'm an historian. The evidence from throughout the history of our species, from all over the world, shows that humans initially imagined spirits and gods who could be invoked to help them hunt food, grow crops, avoid natural catastrophes, or whatever. Gradually, humans further fashioned their religions into tools with which the powerful could better control their subjects by pretending rulers are representatives of gods -- or even embodiments of gods. Your Bible wasn't written by God or any other imagined spirit. There is overwhelming evidence that your Bible is a compilation of myths which were written and edited by people.

BILL

But those people were divinely inspired and directed to record God's truth. Many of the sites mentioned and described in the Biblical accounts have already been excavated and identified. You can't deny the historical records uncovered at these sites. That's all evidence of the truth of the Bible.

MARK

They also excavated and identified the site of Troy from the Trojan War as described in Homer's Iliad. Is that evidence that Zeus and all the other gods Homer wrote about exist, too?

BILL

Everyone knows Greek Mythology was just that: mythology, not the truth.

MARK

Yeah, we sneer condescendingly at pagan religions. The ancient Greeks couldn't explain why sounds reverberate in canyons so they came up with the myth of Echo and Narcissus. How silly. And the ancient Hebrews couldn't explain why there were so many languages and so they came up with the myth of the Tower of Babel. Now you and so many others label the ancient Greek religion as mythological tales of false gods while simultaneously labeling every word in the Old and New Testaments as dictated by the real God.

MARK (Cont.)

I wish people still worshipped pagan gods instead of being enthralled with monotheism. Monotheism is the source of religious intolerance. Before monotheism, when one group conquered another group, the vanquished survivors figured their conqueror's gods were obviously stronger, so they might as well worship their conqueror's gods -- no big deal. Monotheism comes along and all of a sudden the vanquished must fight against any and all efforts to restrict how they worshipped their one, true god.

BILL

Sounds like maybe monotheism served as the inspiration for modern man's craving for freedom. What d'ya think history professor?

MARK

(thinking for a while as a grin slowly grows, then nodding slightly, approvingly)

I'll have to think more about that.

(less aggressively, temporarily)

But so many times when monotheists fought -- and fight even now -- they justify their wars by claiming they are defending their god. Puny mortals have to fight to defend an all-powerful supernatural being? Is there any conceit more absurd than that?

BILL

Don't condemn all who believe in God by the bad actions of a handful of those from the past or even the present. We who obtained God's true grace encourage others to receive that same blessing by helping everyone hear the words of God as written in his sacred texts, not by conquering them.

MARK

All the suffering in our world -- is that part of your god's blessing? Is this what your god looks at every day and says, "Yeah, that's about right?" If your god exists, I sincerely hope He is guilty of no worse than neglect. Otherwise, the only other rational conclusion is that He sadistically brings down calamities on humans just to reap their pitiful praise and beseeching prayers.

BILL

Just like one must never take for granted those who have helped us, like parents and friends, we must never take for granted the incredible miracles our Creator performs for our benefit. God works His miracles every day. You just have to open your eyes and your mind to see His miracles. Crops grow from tiny seeds, the miracle of birth, the way our body's function. Miracles abound.

MARK

Fine. Talk about how life has evolved on our planet and declare it to be miraculous. How about big, gaudy, cannot-be-denied-nor-explained-in-any-other-way miracles. I'd become a believer if some guy in a white robe appeared, waved his staff, and the Red Sea parted or dead people rose out of cemeteries -- today, in front of thousands of witnesses and hundreds of video cameras. Why doesn't your God perform miracles like that anymore?

BILL

God reveals Himself gradually to us, in His own way, in His own time. For example, with guidance and help from God, modern medicine has brought many patients back to life after they died.

MARK

If you believe that, you must also believe that with guidance and help from your god, modern warfare has slaughtered tens of millions of people and wreaked hell on earth for hundreds of millions.

BILL: Mark, why must you focus on the bad things and look past the wonderful things? And He's not my god, He's our god. He is God for all of us, and He loves us all whether we accept or reject him.

MARK

He loves us?

(counting with his fingers)

He's omniscient, omnipotent, and he loves us all.

(displaying three raised fingers)

Pick two.

(manipulating the three fingers
as a visual aid)

Maybe He knows that we suffer here on Earth, wants to help us, but is powerless to do so. Maybe he wants to help and has the power to help, but doesn't know that we suffer. Or maybe he knows that we suffer, has the power, but enjoys watching us suffer. There is no way we get the misery in this world if a supernatural being simultaneously knows about it, can prevent it, and loves us all.

BILL

I find the inner strength to deal with whatever hardships we face because I have faith in the truth that whatever befalls me is part of God's plan for me. A life well lived, devoted to our Lord, will be rewarded with eternal bliss.

MARK

Yes, of course, the posthumous reward. Do you know what was the most important text in the history of western religion? It wasn't the Books of the Torah or any of the Gospels or the Koran. It was the Book of Job. Why?

MARK (Cont.)

Because without Job, when hard times befell people who were doing what their religious managers decreed they must do to appease a god, the people figured the religious managers had fallen out of favor with the gods or were making it all up, and the people branded them false profits and killed or banished them.

But the story of Job taught the people that if things are going badly, even really badly, despite doing everything the religious managers told you to do, don't blame the managers. It was because Satan double-dared God to test your faith. And God, like any typical five-year-old at the playground, just couldn't resist a double-dare. You and so many others accept that explanation even today.

BILL

It costs me nothing to believe what I believe, but by so doing, I derive from my faith guidance, strength, and comfort. It instills purpose for living and a code of morality by which to live. Faith is a gift, but we must open our minds and our hearts to receive it.

MARK

And close our eyes to keep it.

You think that's all it takes? -- a willing suspension of disbelief? That's fine for enjoying a night out at the theater, pretending I'm seeing full reality when there's only a backdrop and a few props. But you want me to pretend I'm not seeing the full reality of the random universe which doesn't give a rat's ass about any of us.

I can choose my own purpose in life and morality without blindly following some book. Although, to be honest, I wish I could derive the solace you say you get from your beliefs. But one can't simply choose to believe something which is unbelievable.

(SERVER 2 approaches)

SERVER 2

Would you gentlemen like another round?

MARK

(to SERVER 2)

Do you believe in God?

BILL

Mark, don't do this.

MARK

(to BILL)

It's an innocuous question.

(to SERVER 2)

Do you believe in God?

SERVER 2

Of course.

MARK

Is God simultaneously omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent?

SERVER 2

(covering up her lack of
understanding those words)

Yeah, He's everything.

MARK

(realizing she didn't
understand his question)

And yet this God who loves us and wants the best for us -- His children -- and knows how we suffer and has the power to prevent that suffering, still allows us to suffer terribly. How do you explain that?

SERVER 2

Didn't anyone ever teach you we cannot know the ways of the Lord. We just have to pray for His guidance and grace.

MARK

Don't you think the people in the Nazi concentration camps prayed? That didn't work out real well for them, did it?

SERVER 2

God punished the Jews for not accepting his blood sacrifice.

MARK

I could have sworn you just told me that we cannot know the ways of the Lord. Yet here you are confidently explaining that the Holocaust was revenge from God. So, you do know the ways of the Lord. Or is it just that you know the ways of the Lord when bad things happen to those you don't like, but we can't know the ways of the Lord when bad things happen to ourselves or people we do like?

SERVER 2

You just don't understand.

(She leaves, followed by a pregnant pause)

BILL

A little while ago you said you are envious of those who can believe in God. Did you mean to say you are jealous of them, instead?

MARK

What's the difference between "jealous" and "envious"?

BILL

"Envious" is when you wish you also had what someone else has.
"Jealous" is when you want to deprive that other person of what you wish you had.

MARK

I'm pretty sure the dictionary doesn't make that distinction. I think they're synonyms.

BILL

Well they shouldn't be. There's a definite need for words that make that distinction.
If you had stripped away her faith just now, would you have felt better about not being able to find your own?

MARK

You, accusing me of proselytizing? Physician, heal thyself.

BILL

When I, or others, urge acceptance of the Lord, it's because we find comfort and joy from His grace and wish that for everyone. All you were doing is trying to strip away that faith from her and leave her with nothing. What you were doing is just a case of misery loves company.

MARK

There was no danger that woman, or any other self-described "true believer" is going to be convinced they're deluded. If that were possible, it would have happened long ago. I read a book about religion written by someone who acknowledged the inconsistencies and fundamental falsehoods in religion; but after writing about each example, she dismissed the obvious conclusion by declaring her own beliefs were transcending and ineffable and ineffable "transcendentals." She was declaring her beliefs don't have to withstand scrutiny as long as she declares them to be inscrutable. Her logic was "effed-up." You true believers all hide behind the excuse of, "We cannot know the ways of the Lord" whenever your myths and superstitions bang their heads against the brick wall of reality. If a child hearing the story of "Little Red Riding Hood" asks how Grandma emerged from the big bad wolf's stomach without any harm when the hunter cut open the wolf, no one says, "We cannot know the ways of the hunter." We tell the truth and say somebody made it up. It's just a fairy tale to teach children to avoid being gullible -- an important lesson we then wash away under a flood of equally fictitious stories from our religions while we preach to our children they must never question any of those fairy tales.

BILL

Once we accept our Lord into our hearts, with full devotion, it is not important to try to understand the ways of our Lord. One is never alone nor lonely when one walks with God. That's what is important.

MARK

It's true that humans have a great need not to be alone. That's why when a young child is lonely, he or she often makes up an imaginary friend for companionship. Then we grow up, Bill.

(pauses to allow the implication
of that statement be absorbed)

Speaking of children, remember the old sit-com cliché of a mother telling her misbehaving child, "Just wait 'till your father comes home?" God makes for a much more potent and ubiquitous father-figure than any husband can. You think it's a coincidence that one of the commandments is "Honor thy mother and father?" You think it's a coincidence that people who had little involvement with religion since they were children turn back to religion when they become parents? It's not just about inculcating your kids with your heritage. It's about controlling them. God is the biggest, baddest "wait 'till your father comes home" there is.

First parents start with telling their kids about Santa Claus, living at the North Pole, with a big, white beard, who knows if you've been bad or good, and rewards you with gifts if you've been good. Then when the kids get old enough to comprehend more abstract notions, parents admit they lied about Santa Claus, but then claim they're telling the truth now about this other guy, living in the heavens, with a big beard, who also knows if you've been bad or good, and rewards you with eternal bliss posthumously if you've been good. And no one says, "Sounds like the same lie in a slightly different package." Doesn't anyone catch on?

And do you know why western religion dictates against suicide and against abortion and against birth control and even dictates the timing of when a husband and wife can have sex together -- timing which maximizes the likelihood of pregnancy? It's because those bronze-age cultures which invented what evolved into today's western religions were constantly conquering and enslaving rivals while trying to avoid being conquered and enslaved themselves. And the best way to succeed at that was to outnumber your rivals. You think it's a coincidence that the leaders of those bronze-age tribes claimed their god demanded the flock be fruitful and multiply, and made it a sin to do anything which would inhibit that objective?

By the way, how does religious management consistently get away with turning on and off the suicide switch when it suits them?

BILL

There's no switching. Suicide is against God's will. It's that simple.

MARK

Like when the devout Jewish Zealots fighting to maintain their religion in defiance of the pagan Roman invasion killed themselves before the Romans stormed Masada? Or, like when the deeply religious Christian sect in Jonestown drank cyanide at the behest of their leader? Or, like when the order is given to strap on a suicide belt and blow yourself up on a bus full of women and children so you're guaranteed to get into Heaven and get laid for eternity by virgins who, being virgins, could therefore not compare you to any previous partners and realize what a pathetic excuse of a man you are in that regard, too. Come on. And no one says, "You're making this up as you go? If it's a guaranteed ticket to Heaven, why are you telling me to do it? Do it yourself."

BILL

No one can deny that religion, like any institution, can be abused by self-serving individuals.

MARK

And that's the point. Religion was invented by self-serving individuals. Everything about religion is designed to enable self-serving individuals to control the masses. Religions inculcate their flocks with having to believe without question the words in books written by people whose understanding of the universe was barely one step above that of Neanderthals. Do you think it's just a coincidence that all the wacky cults are based on religion?

BILL

I was a Dead Head when I was younger. That was a pretty wacky cult built around a rock band, not a religion.

MARK

(pondering)

You're correct. I take that back. Not all cults are religions. But look at what just happened. You made a compelling argument so I admitted I was wrong. A person should be open-minded to be able to realize and admit mistakes. But a billion people believe the Pope is infallible.

BILL

I certainly don't believe that.

MARK

But you believe every word in your version of the Bible you carry around with you was dictated by God. So you believe your copy of the Bible is infallible. Except there are ancient copies of the Bible still in existence today which differ dramatically from the version you carry around with you. Which copy is the infallible word of God?

BILL:

(motioning to indicate he is
talking about the universe)

How did all this start? You're content believing there was no Creator?

MARK

I guess I am as content with no one having created the universe as you are in believing no one created God. Look, we can't relate to eternity -- it's not part of our experience. We can't "sense" it. It's like a person born blind who can't comprehend colors because the blind person never experienced color -- never sensed it. That person can repeat the words which denote different colors, can choose to believe the explanation of what color is, but can't relate to it.

BILL

You criticize my stating we cannot know the ways of the Lord while you are comfortable with saying we cannot relate to eternity.

You say a person born blind cannot relate to color, and yet color exists.

Using your example, how can a person born blind accept that handicap without believing in God and His all-encompassing purpose for us?

MARK

We can't flap our arms and fly. How do we accept that handicap?

BILL

That's different because no one can fly. You can accept a limitation suffered by all of us.

MARK

We all die. Why do you insist I need God to accept that limitation?

BILL

If you truly felt that way, you wouldn't have used words like "despair" earlier to describe what you're experiencing.

MARK

(after a painful pause)

It hit me hard. I felt horrified -- not just scared -- horrified. Then disillusioned -- you know, what a waste life is. Then frustrated -- I needed to fight something or someone -- but who, what, how? Then came this roiling, overwhelming anger. I actually turned my face toward the sky -- me, the atheist -- and wanted to scream out, "This isn't fair. Why me?" At that moment, the most surreal thing happened. I imagined a booming, deep voice coming from the heavens saying, "Because you piss me off."

MARK (Cont.)

Would you believe I suddenly broke out in uncontrollable laughter? I did. It must have been two or three minutes. And when I came back to my senses -- that's the best way I could describe it -- I felt so much better. It felt like I had released the emotions -- a catharsis. But it was short-lived.

BILL

And that's why you still referred to what you are experiencing as "despair."

MARK

That and the lack of a legacy. How ironic that I chose a career studying and teaching about the people who left their imprint on our heritage, our culture, our technology, and I leave nothing any future historian will take note of.

BILL

One's legacy is in the way we affect the people we interact with. You've already done so much that way and there's still time to do more.

MARK

On several occasions in the past, before all this happened, I wondered what should one do when one learns one only has a short time to live. In a sense, we realize we have only a short time to live from the moment we learn that we all have to die. So why should we do anything differently when some doctor offers a barely educated opinion of how short that time might be?

BILL

Earth to Mark. Earth to Mark. Things are different. If you're driving and you feel like you're going to need a rest stop soon, you're not going to make the same decision about whether to stop if you're five minutes from home rather than several hours from getting home.

(MARK looks at BILL quizzically)

BILL

Alright, that wasn't the most powerful analogy; but it's true. We routinely put off things we wish to do while our life -- which could end in an instant, without any warning -- is still of undetermined duration. But now, things are different for you -- and for your family, too.

MARK

(musingly)

Family. You were more like a father than a brother to me, after dad died. Did you resent having to grow up so fast?

BILL

Maybe I did. I didn't allow myself to think about it, I guess. I do remember though that just after dad died, I was in Bible study one evening, and they were teaching us to avoid premarital sex because a teenager is not ready to take responsibility for a family.

And you were more than a handful to take responsibility for -- such a rebellious child.

MARK

Yes, I was a little shit. Then I grew up. Now, I'm a big shit.

(they chuckle cautiously together)

MARK

Bill, I've become a really big shit.

This past semester, I was teaching a new class I created. I had grown tired of the usual introductory-level elective courses for non-history majors I had to teach and convinced my department head to allow me to try out a really great syllabus I developed. I was so excited about it and the students were reacting so well to it. I was going to turn the syllabus into a textbook during my summer off --

(chuckling sardonically now)

-- my legacy.

And then I was diagnosed with the cancer. Maybe it hit me even harder because I was riding an emotional high. I felt sorry for myself and so selfish.

I took advantage of a young, sweet, passionate student in the class -- a graduating senior who was so excited about the class, and about her future. I didn't seduce her, but I also didn't dissuade her when I sensed her interest. Maybe that's why I can't talk to Gina about the cancer. She deserved my best and I gave her my worst. How can I admit that to her? But how can I keep that from her?

BILL

(after a strained silence)

How do you wish to be remembered by your family?

MARK

(slowly nodding his head,
pained, remorsefully)

What do Gina and the kids need from me now?

BILL

That's a tough one for me to answer.

(sarcastically)

I wonder who might be able to answer that question?

MARK

I don't know if I can do that. I fear that more than death.

BILL

All the more reason to do it. If you can overcome that fear, dying will be soup of duck.

(the table on left stage gradually becomes illuminated, revealing LOU and AMY, with AMY to the left, in restrained conversation)

MARK

(glancing around the room while fighting off a smile)

You've always been amazingly good at manipulating people.

BILL

(wincing playfully)

I prefer to be called a student of human nature. It's a skill every salesman cultivates.

MARK

Alright, student of human nature, let's try some people storying.

BILL

Uhhhh, sure. What's people storying?

MARK

It's a term I picked up. That's not important. What's the nature of those two humans at that table over there?

BIL

(intentionally being funny, as the tension dissipates and transitions into modestly light-hearted camaraderie)

The man is telling his daughter for the first time that she's adopted. No? The woman is a mail order bride, meeting her new husband for the first time.

MARK

A way-over-the-hill call girl with one of her rapidly-diminishing clientele.

(they quietly chuckle mischievously as the illumination and sound fade on their half of the stage. sound fades in for the other table)

AMY

(apologetically)

It's just that it's so difficult to communicate, in general, and when not talking face-to-face, it seems hopeless. Without seeing a person's reaction, you have no idea what the reaction was. You write letters to the editor, but they don't get published. Why?

AMY (Cont.)

You never find out? You sign up for an on-line social interaction group with former classmates and try to get a bio exchange going, but almost no one participates. Why? Nobody says. You write a detailed review of a hotel for a travel bot, but almost no one who reads it rates it as useful.

LOU

(coolly)

Sure. I get that.

AMY

Thank you.

This is kind of a charming place -- a lot of character.

LOU

The Does? Yeah, we locals like it. A lot of regulars. We nod at each other but don't get into each other's space. It's not a pick-up joint or anything like that. Just a relatively quiet spot, decent drinks, decent food, quirky service. It works.

AMY

I really wish I could have met your father. I'm sorry for your loss.

LOU

(dismissively)

It's been a while.

AMY

I wrote you that my mother passed away more recently. I'm still having a very difficult time with that. I can't keep myself from crying when I think about certain memories. Each time, I think I cried it out, but it doesn't work that way, does it?

LOU

The only way to stop crying is to choose to stop crying. They say time heals. No. You heal when you choose to heal.

AMY

Was it that easy for you?

LOU

(defensively overreacting)

My father was a wonderful man and I miss him. But ultimately we only have two choices: either make it worse or don't.

AMY

You sound like my therapist.

AMY (Cont.)

Yet, doesn't it seem wrong? You watch a nature show and they film a herd of grazing animals on the plains of Africa, or wherever, more like sandwiches on the hoof, and a lion or cheetah or some other predator attacks, and all the sandwiches take off running, and the predator catches one, and the rest settle down a short distance away and go back to grazing like nothing happened. "Tough luck for poor old Charlie, but the cat didn't get me this time, so I'll just carry on." How different are we?

(SERVER 2 approaches)

SERVER 2

Hey, you guys. My name is Dana. I'll be serving you tonight. Can I start you off with something to drink?

LOU

Baileys on the rocks for me.

AMY

I'd like a kahlua and cream, please; but does the bartender typically make it strong or watered down?

SERVER 2

To be honest, this is my first night here and I haven't tried that yet. Tell me how you'd like it.

AMY

Well, not real strong. Is that good enough?

SERVER 2

We'll give it a shot.

LOU

No pun intended.

(SERVER 2 chuckles while leaving)

AMY

I know. Who orders an alcoholic drink and actually wants it watered down?

LOU

That is a bit unusual.

AMY

I don't like the taste of alcohol, but I like the taste of kahlua when it's watered down so that you can't taste the alcohol.

LOU

You could order coffee with some chocolate and half and half mixed together.

AMY

Wouldn't I have to give all kinds of instructions on how to make it because what bartender would know how to make it taste like a watered down kahlua and cream? I wouldn't even know how to make one myself, let alone tell someone else.

LOU

Suit yourself.

AMY

As I was saying before, I really appreciate your willingness to meet with me. I was very concerned that, with all the spam and malware going around, you'd just blow me off when I wrote to you.

LOU

You knew too much about my father to be a spammer.

AMY

I only learned about him a few weeks ago, just before my mother died, and I was full-time dealing with my mother's death until very recently.

LOU

My father was a dreamer. He dreamed of making lots of money, but it never happened.

AMY

(offended but trying -- not entirely successfully -- not to show it)

I'm not here trying to put a claim on any inheritance. I couldn't care less about that. My husband and I live comfortably, our children are adults, doing fine with their families.

LOU

(defensively)

Look, I get this message from someone I never knew existed about some connection to my father. What am I supposed to think?

AMY

(scoffingly but without bitterness)

Do I look like I could be your sister?

(SERVER 2 approaches with their drinks)

SERVER 2

Here you go.

(sets the drinks in front of them)

Baileys for you and the kahlua and cream for you. Taste that and see if it's watered down enough.

AMY

(takes a sip)

I think that'll be fine. I'll just let the ice melt a little more.

SERVER 2

I can take it back and we'll do it again.

AMY

No, this will be fine, I'm sure, thank you.

SERVER 2

Will there be anything else now?

AMY

No, thank you.

LOU

I'm fine for now, thanks.

SERVER 2

Great. I'll come by later to check on you guys.

(SERVER 2 leaves)

LOU

My father also dreamed of fame or at least recognition for his good deeds, but that never happened either. That's the reason I agreed to meet you. You initially wrote that you wanted to thank him. For what?

AMY

For saving my mother and me.

Just before she passed away, my mother told me about what your father did for us. She never wanted to intrude on his life, and especially not risk causing any possible embarrassment for him, so she never told me before. I guess she knew I would want to thank him. I can be impulsive sometimes. But she always felt she was betraying his good deeds by not letting me know how much we owed to him. So she finally told me.

When your father was a soldier, he found my mother with her newborn child, me, destitute, cast out by her family for having become pregnant out of wedlock. He took pity on us, and even feigned a marriage with my mother to bring us to the United States. But he was already married to your mother. My mother said he had a young son, Lou. That's how I found you after I couldn't find anything about your father.

LOU

Did he live with your mother?

AMY

No. He was faithful to your mother. He never asked for anything in return. He took pity on us and feigned marriage just to get us here. He and my mother never communicated again after that. He was our angel.

LOU

He never said anything about that.

AMY

(saddened)

Maybe he was ashamed of us.

LOU

(chuckling gently)

Considering all the things my father did which he should have been ashamed of but wasn't, I'm guessing he wasn't ashamed of doing something noble.

There was one time, a few years ago, when he started to tell me about the horrors he saw while in the army. The recollections depressed him terribly. Now that I think about it, it seemed like he was going somewhere with the stories; but then abruptly walked out of the room.

These days they have a label for it: PTSD. Back then, many of the soldiers who returned were traumatized, too, but it wasn't acceptable to admit it. So they suppressed the memories and the problems as best they could, on their own.

AMY

It was the culture then. My mother never confided any of her problems. She internalized everything. The only way I realized she was losing her hearing was when I walked into the room one day and found her watching TV and the volume was so loud it hurt my ears. I thought she had been becoming a little befuddled, but I realized she had often not heard what I said and pretended she had. She didn't want to be annoying by asking me to repeat myself.

LOU

Dad's hearing degraded drastically over his last decade or so. I used to get so impatient with him, sometimes, when he wouldn't wear his hearing aids. I started losing my hearing lately. I've been reading that hearing aids are of very limited use for people with severe hearing loss. They can make sound louder, but offer very limited improvement in comprehension. A lot of people with severe hearing loss don't wear their hearing aids much of the time because they're almost useless. Why couldn't I have known that then? I would have been more patient with him.

LOU (Cont.)

He had tinnitus, too -- you know, hearing constant noise that isn't there. One day I saw him sitting by the window, with a big grin on his face. He said, "It changed again," pointing to his ear. He said it went from a field of crickets to, how did he put it? -- a commercial-free radio station show: "Benny Goodman's Big Band plays Mariachi." I laughed. Then he added something like, "with all the things my ears come up with to entertain me, you'd think just once they would give me a hot ditty I could sell."

AMY

I wonder if ... I think you just solved a mystery for me. I bet my mother had tinnitus and that was why she wouldn't use the alarm clock I bought her.

I got her a really simple alarm clock -- she would get flustered easily by technology -- big display of the time, super easy to set the time and to set the alarm time, and it played music stored on it when the alarm went off so she wouldn't even have to fuss with tuning in a station and adjusting it periodically. I came by one early morning to take her to a doctor appointment and she was still asleep. When I asked her about the alarm clock she said it wasn't working because the music would come on at all kinds of crazy times during the night and she couldn't turn it off.

Now I'm guessing she had tinnitus, like your father did, and she would mistake what she would sometimes be hearing in her head when she would wake up in the middle of the night as the alarm clock going off. And hitting the snooze button or the off button wouldn't stop that. Because she was losing her hearing, the music that played when the alarm went off would have seemed no louder to her than what she was hearing from the tinnitus. She couldn't tell the difference. I didn't realize.

Growing old is the worst, except for the alternative.

LOU

That's clever.

(wistfully)

My father was a good man. He used to tell me never be ashamed of who you are, because you had no choice in that. Instead, invest your time and energy making what you are worthy of pride.

It must have been really difficult for your mother in this country.

AMY

Definitely. Alone in a new country. She could barely speak a word of English, with an infant on top of everything else. She never married or even took a lover. No family except me. How she managed is beyond me. It is often claimed that those who endure adversity emerge stronger. I'm sorry to say, though, the benefits of misery have been greatly overstated.

AMY (Cont.)

She survived, but the experience broke her. As the end approached, my mother gradually lost interest in living; as if she was waiting for death, or maybe preparing herself for it, or maybe wishing for it. I think the ills and aches of old age serve a valuable purpose, though. They suppress our survival instinct and prepare us to accept the inevitable. She said she lived a good life and was grateful. I asked her what makes a life a good life. She said you have to make something you're proud of. Then she smiled slightly, looked deep into my eyes, smiled more broadly, tipped her head slowly toward me and quietly said, "I did."

LOU

Wow! What did you say?

AMY

Nothing. And yet, at that very moment, I knew with great certainty exactly what I would be opening with at my next therapy session.

LOU

So there wasn't any of that "What would you like to talk about today?" at the beginning of that session, huh?

AMY

Nor at the next 47 sessions.

LOU

The key word in what you said is "inevitable." What can you do? I still remember vividly something my father told me once along those lines. When I was growing up, if he caught me being idle, even for a little while, he would scold me. One day I responded, "What's wrong with just killing time a little now and then?" He said "You will mourn having killed time now when time eventually exacts its revenge."

AMY

That obviously had quite an impact on you for you to remember it all these years.

LOU

(scoffing)

Oh, I remember plenty.

One of his favorite quotes was from Winston Churchill -- he would always be sure to provide attribution, as if his willingness to give credit to others might induce the world to give him credit, too.

(using an unnaturally, deep voice)

Winston Churchill would say, "The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."

LOU (Cont.)

Sure, I get the gung-ho sentiment. That's what kept him going, after all. But every frustrating, depressing failure despite persistence was the result of seizing an opportunity which would probably have been better left un-seized. And there are many more failures than successes. These one-size-fits-all platitudes are a disservice.

AMY

A penny saved is a penny earned, but penny wise and pound foolish.

Look before you leap, but he who hesitates is lost.

LOU

Exactly.

AMY

Speaking of look before you leap, years ago, a neighbor's son was fooling around with some buddies and jumped over a low fence while running, but there was a ditch on the other side which he could not see before he jumped. He's a quadriplegic now. Perhaps one could say he was lucky he didn't die. I'm not so sure. One terribly unfortunate instant, one not-unreasonable action -- and then look what became of the rest of his life. Life is too damn fragile.

More and more I see or hear about people I know having health problems, including the permanent lack of a pulse. Even the local newspaper taunts me. I feel like they started printing their obituary column in a larger font size.

LOU

Possible pair of threes.

(noticing AMY's consternation)

I'm sorry. That's an expression that slips out occasionally. It's something one of my poker-night buddies likes to say. It's nothing.

AMY

No, please tell me.

LOU

In seven card stud, the dealer kind of narrates what he sees happening in the cards he deals out each round. Things like "Pair of jacks" if there are two jacks showing in front of a player, or "Possible straight" if three or four of the five cards needed for a straight are showing, since there is the possibility that the two hidden down-cards dealt earlier could give the player all five. Anyway, when Marty is dealing and he deals a "three" to someone whose cards are showing nothing interesting he always says, "Possible pair of threes." It's just a funny way of saying that player's got nothing so far.

AMY

So my preoccupation about mortality is a possible pair of threes
-- nothing?

LOU

I guess that didn't sound particularly empathetic, did it?

AMY

(smiling to let him off the hook)

Don't you want to know what happens? -- what the future will be?
-- how this all turns out after we're gone?

My son came for a visit recently. Over dinner, he told us about
how one popular theory now is that the universe is being pushed
ever outward and eventually, a humongozillion years from now, or
something, everything will be so far apart from everything else,
that you won't be able to see anything in the sky. No stars --
nothing. It evoked a real visceral reaction, ya know?

LOU

Do you have any idea how many chins I would have a
humongozillion years from now?

We experience the passing of our aged, stricken parents, breathe
a guilt-ridden sigh of relief, then try not to think about the
fact that we're now awaiting our turn, hoping it won't come too
soon and we won't suffer too badly on the way there. What else
can we do?

(AMY begins to stare off past LOU,
toward right stage, which is unlit
and remains that way)

LOU

(wondering silently whether she
is zoning out, contemplating what
he said, or seeing something
interesting, looks over his shoulder
toward where she is staring)

Cute couple. Both wearing wedding bands. She's drinking only a
soda. I'm guessing they're trying to get pregnant -- been trying
for a while. They decided to go out on a date, for a change;
have a good time together and hopefully take the pressure off.

(there's a pause of silence, long
enough to leave in doubt whether
AMY's next/final remark is addressing
his people story or his prior advice)

AMY

(still without changing her demeanor,
except for now starting to slightly
nod her head)

I think you're right.

(LOU looks puzzled, wondering what AMY was referring to. Illumination fades out on stage.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF ACT)

FIN